

EFFECTIVE GENERATIONAL MINISTRY

**Biblical and Practical Insights
for Transforming Church Communities**

Elisabeth A. Nesbit Sbanotto
and Craig L. Blomberg


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(from Elisabeth) to Joan Burgess Wells—my teacher, my supervisor, my mentor, and my friend. You have generously shared yourself, your faith, your tears, and your joys with me, modeling well what it means to have a disproportionate influence on the generations that follow.

and

(from Craig) to Jim Beck—my friend, my encourager, my prayer companion, and my colleague. You have generously shared yourself, your faith, your commitments, and your wisdom with me, modeling well how to integrate biblical theology and psychology in scholarship and in life.

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Preface

Numerous voices in the publishing world these days clamor for collaborative projects. In a world characterized by the explosion of information and access to that information, many projects require multiple authors. At least the finished products are better if more than one person contributes to them. In addition to numerous singly authored books, I (Craig) have been privileged to coauthor and coedit several other books (and a couple of journal articles) with talented and gifted friends and colleagues. Not only has this made better contributions to my field (New Testament studies) possible, but I have benefited from learning about topics and disciplines into which I might not otherwise have ventured so extensively. This book is the latest result of my coauthoring and cross-disciplinary interests.

Elisabeth Nesbit Sbanotto was my student and is now my colleague at Denver Seminary. She is a vivacious, hardworking, bright, and very gifted researcher, professor, consultant, and counselor. As the years go by, I expect her to make a considerable mark in the field of publishing as well. I have learned so much from her already in her four years on faculty with us, and I count her as a dear friend.

Generational similarities and differences have always intrigued me. I never understood the need for the “generation gap” that my peers made famous when we were young adults. I liked my parents and appreciated most of their values! The best small group and Bible study experiences I have had, hands down, have always been intergenerational in makeup. Although I am a Baby Boomer who works with primarily Baby Boomer colleagues, at least those who are full-time professors at Denver Seminary, I attend a church that was established as a city-outreach ministry to Gen-Xers fifteen years ago. Today

it has at least as many Millennials as Xers. My two daughters and their closest friends are Millennials, and the longer I teach, the higher a percentage of my students fall into that category as well. So I have at least some sustained experience with the topics in which Elisabeth is an expert, and it behooves me to learn as much as I can to complement those experiences with the solid research foundation she brings to the table.

The 1970s and 1980s formed the peak years of the development of the homogeneous church growth movement as a philosophy. Practitioners carried on with some success through the 1990s and early 2000s. But over the last ten years or so, Millennials have been increasingly calling for more intergenerational activities. Given half a chance, they like their parents and their parents' peers. Meanwhile, aging Baby Boomers, not least those becoming grandparents, value connections with their children, their children's peers, and with their grandchildren as well. And Xers patiently wait their turn in leadership, hoping to be given the opportunity rather than become the generation that just gets skipped over.

Too many churches and parachurch organizations know too little about the similarities and differences among the three largest generations that make up the American populace today, and they often suffer because of it. That fact more than any other forms the motive for creating this book. We would like to thank the administration and board of trustees of Denver Seminary for continuing to value and promote faculty research and writing in an era when too many Christian institutions value it too little. I am grateful for so many congenial colleagues on our faculty who support those of us who write a little more than some others. I have profoundly appreciated the help of my research assistants Emily Gill and Sara Bibb Evans during the parts of the three academic years during which this work was conceived and carried out. I am particularly beholden to my grader, Darlene Seal, who stayed with me for three years in that capacity and developed such expertise that I rarely needed to go over her work with anything more than the most cursory of spot-checking. These three young women freed up so much time for my actual writing that I can scarcely begin to thank them enough. Elisabeth would like to thank Roy Farley, Kristin Higgins, Lynn Koch, and Jim Hammons at the University of Arkansas for serving as her committee in the design, execution, and completion of her dissertation, and to all who participated in the focus groups themselves. She is grateful to dear friends Amy Anderson, Alycia Homeyer, and Joy Meekins, and to her parents, Gary and Hanna Nesbit, for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout the dissertation research process that provided the foundational material for this book. Finally, she is indebted to her mother, Hanna Nesbit, and her "Mormor,"

Lisa Schmidt, for teaching her to be curious about people—always striving to see the good in others and to understand both how and why others see the world the way they do.

Elisabeth and I would like to dedicate this book to two of our senior professors on the Denver Seminary faculty. Joan Burgess Wells taught counseling for eighteen years full-time and several more part-time both before and after that tenure. Jim Beck taught counseling for twenty-two years full-time and several more classes after his retirement. Joan was a special encouragement to Elisabeth as well as a mentor and friend. Jim was a special encouragement to me, as well as a cherished colleague, fellow pray-er, and good friend. It is to these two special individuals that we offer this volume.

Introduction

But those who bemoan the next generation's shortcomings grow more and more bitter, angry, disappointed and cynical. On the other hand, those who bless not only grow old with grace and joy, they have a disproportionate influence on the generation that follows.

Gordon T. Smith¹

Little did I (Elisabeth) know, sitting in a Bible class in seminary, that nearly ten years later I would be writing a book on the topic of generational differences in ministry with one of my esteemed professors. It was in one of my Bible classes (although I don't remember which course or with which professor specifically) that the seeds for this book were planted. I had grown up in the church with godly parents who discussed theology over dinner like some families discuss local sports teams. I loved it and intentionally chose to attend Denver Seminary for my counseling degree so that I could appease my own interest in theology while still acquiring solid training in my vocational area of interest. But, sitting in that classroom, I remember having the distinct thought, *If Scripture doesn't change, and doctrine doesn't change, why do I feel as if this class helps me have a conversation with my parents but it will not help me answer the questions of my peers?* At the time, I was aware that the work of integration and application was mine to do, but simultaneously I was also keenly aware that the theological questions of my peers were vastly different from those of my parents and their friends. I left that course, and seminary as a whole, with a greater awe and appreciation for Scripture, church

1. Gordon T. Smith, *Courage and Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 71.

history, and doctrine, as well as a deep curiosity and passion for discovering what my peers and those younger than myself needed differently in order to passionately capture the power, awe, and mystery of faith in Jesus. I wanted to figure out why those born after 1981 struggled so deeply to connect with the church and saw the church as intolerant and archaic, and how pastors, ministry leaders, and mentors needed to re-envision evangelism and discipleship in order to reach them.

A few years later I found myself at a secular state university in need of a dissertation topic for my PhD in Counselor Education and Supervision. I needed something that would be relevant in the field of counseling but was also something I was passionate about. I knew that I could not do anything expressly “Christian” in the program I was a part of, and I wondered what the underlying question was beneath the pondering I had had in my Bible class. Counselors love studying and understanding multiculturalism, and after doing some foundational research I began to wonder whether it were possible to look at each generation as a separate culture. I realized that this study was not likely to answer my Bible class question directly, but I wondered whether it could possibly enlighten the backdrop of that question and provide a foundation on which to build. It did. A grounded theory qualitative study utilizing focus groups allowed me to explore whether it were possible to view Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials as separate *cultures* based on each cohort having their own unique values, beliefs, and worldviews.² My study serves as the foundation upon which this book was written and, throughout this book, provides firsthand narrative from Baby Boomers, Xers, and Millennials about how their generational affiliation has shaped their values, beliefs, and worldview.³ Any unattributed quotations throughout this book are from the interviews used to complete this study.

Fast forward a couple more years, and I delightedly found myself back at Denver Seminary, but this time in the role of a professor. A few months into the position, I was asked to give an alumni webinar titled “Millennials in Ministry,” in which I described the characteristics of each generational cohort and focused on how to use mentoring to reach Millennials.⁴ Specifically, I concentrated on how those of older cohorts needed to seek out those in younger ones to intentionally invest in. After that presentation, Craig came

2. The definition of culture used in this study was drawn from the American Counseling Association, *ACA Code of Ethics* (Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association, 2005), 20.

3. Elisabeth Anne Nesbit, “Generational Affiliation as a Component of Culture: Focus Group Perspectives of Three Generational Cohorts” (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, 2010).

4. A podcast of this presentation can be found at <http://www.denverseminary.edu> under the alumni tab and is titled “February 2012—Engaging Millennials.”

up to me and said, “I’m going to do what you said.” I paused, panicked a moment inside, and said, “What did I say?” Craig proceeded to invite me into a mentoring relationship in which we eat lunch together once a month; he shares his wisdom and experiences of over thirty years in theological higher education, and I have a safe place to ask questions, share what I am learning, and bounce ideas around. It is from that relationship and Craig’s initiative that I was finally able to embark on a project that let me explore the question I had raised nearly ten years before from my seminary Bible class.

Who Are We Talking About?

The three generations explored in this book span birth years from 1946 through 2001 and include Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generation Xers (1965–1981), and Millennials (1982–2001).⁵ Most generational researchers agree on the boundary lines for Baby Boomers, but some disagree on when Generation X ends and when Millennials begin. We have chosen to use the above boundary lines as they are in keeping with the bulk of the research and follow the guidelines in generational research that demarcate a generation based on duration (at least sixteen years but generally less than twenty-one years) and shared historical life events that take place during key developmental periods of life.⁶ Some generational researchers have identified three separate waves within each generational cohort that generally span five to seven years each.⁷ This means that someone born in 1946 may have some seemingly stark differences from someone born in 1963, even though they are both Baby Boomers. Although different waves may exist, part of what makes a generation a cohort is that older Xers (born in 1966) are likely to still have more in common with younger Xers (born in 1981) than they are with the majority of Baby Boomers.

People of the Silent Generation (1925–1945) have been foundational members in many of our churches.⁸ Earning their name from their steadfastness in life, the Silents made their mark by quietly going about getting done what needed to be done.⁹ We have chosen to start our journey with Baby Boomers,

5. These generational breakdowns and descriptions are unique to American society. While some European and Australian research has found similar themes, the research used in this book is limited to American participants because broadening further into Western society introduces other confounding variables.

6. Betty R. Kupperschmidt, “Multigeneration Employees: Strategies for Effective Management,” *Health Care Manager* 19, no. 1 (2000): 66.

7. *Ibid.*, 65–76.

8. Also occasionally referred to as “Builders” or the “Veteran” generation.

9. See Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584–2069* (Fort Mill, SC: Quill, 1991).

as the Silents are currently only approximately one-third to one-half the size of any other generation in our exploration and because there is significantly less empirical research on Silents than on any of the three other cohorts. Spanning ages seventy to ninety in 2015, many have obviously also passed away. With that being said, we want to acknowledge and give thanks for those in this generation—without them, many of our churches, institutions, and organizations would not have had the foundation upon which Boomers (and later Xers and Millennials) could build. In many ways, the social, political, and cultural growth that Boomers helped to accomplish was only made possible by the steady and solid groundwork laid by Silents.

We divide the book, therefore, into three main sections, one for each cohort— Boomers, Xers, and Millennials. Each section subdivides into three chapters. The first describes common distinctive generational traits. The second assesses those characteristics from a biblical perspective. In every instance, some of the distinctives of the cohort more or less match Christian values, while others work against them. The third chapter in each section makes suggestions for how best to minister among and with that cohort. What will attract them to Christianity and the church, bring them to Christ, help them grow and mature, and maximize their gifts and usefulness within God’s kingdom? What, conversely, should be avoided because it proves counterproductive more often than not? Here we have drawn on a wide variety of recommendations of others but only after we ourselves had reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of each generation and made suggestions that do not closely duplicate what we have found elsewhere.

Who Are Your Guides on This Exploration?

Part of the fun and beauty of this book is that each of us represents a different generation and therefore brings different perspectives to the research. I (Elisabeth) am a “cusper”—born in 1981, I am on the *cusp* of the Generation X and Millennial division line. Although a cusper, I identify more as a Gen-Xer in culture as I was the oldest of three girls raised by Boomer parents. This dynamic caused me to identify as “older” and connected me to those chronologically ahead of me. In my research, as I began to learn more about each cohort, I talked with my sisters (born in 1984 and 1990) about where they saw me affiliating myself. Embodying Millennial culture themselves, they both adamantly rejected the idea that I could pass for a Millennial—a conversation I still find humorous in my memory, due to their outrage at even the consideration that I was “one of them.” In true Xer form, I grew

up identifying myself more as an individual than as part of a collective. I am an adapter or innovator more than an inventor, preferring to identify ways to modify an existing system rather than wanting to design something from scratch. And while I appreciate hierarchy in the workplace, I would much rather be evaluated on my skill than on the duration of time I have spent in any one position.

Craig is a Baby Boomer—born in 1955, smack in the middle of his generational cohort. He also was the older of two children. His younger brother, born in 1962, is a cusper who shares many of the features of Gen-Xers while still ultimately identifying with Baby Boomers. As a result, as Craig was growing up, he had a lot of friends and acquaintances about his age but also a number at the younger end of his cohort. But he also taught high school math for one year straight out of college, attended seminary immediately after that, and went directly on to PhD studies afterward. He got a job teaching New Testament to undergraduate students at age twenty-seven and to masters-level students at thirty-one, so during those years he regularly related mostly to Silents and older Baby Boomers. He believes that, in general, he relates equally well to people of all ages in his cohort and thus does represent them well in the characteristics this book discusses. But those very close to his age will have more shared cultural experiences from their formative years than they will with people on the cusps.

Some Caveats about Culture

In many ways cultural research is an attempt to put together an understanding of the “stereotypical” person within a particular culture or subculture. As we discuss each generation, it will be important to keep in mind that not every person born within that generation’s time frame will perfectly fit the given description. Personality, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation in childhood, ages and marital status of guardians, presence or absence of siblings, and geographic location all contribute to the shaping of someone’s generational identity or generational culture. Just as you would not assume that all people from New York are exactly the same or that every African American has an identical outlook on life, please do not impose such rigidity onto people based on their generational affiliation. In addition to race or ethnicity and the part of the nation or world with which you most identify, other important factors in molding you into who you are include gender, educational opportunities, chances for travel (especially cross-culturally), the presence or absence of major trauma in your life (especially in your early years), birth order, and the like.

Instead, use what you learn about each generation as a starting point for conceptualization, as a single piece in the puzzle of that which contributes to who each person is. People, including you, are far too complex to be defined by a single attribute or group membership. Let this information be informative and descriptive without being prescriptive. In other words, where the insights of this book are helpful in explaining various individuals' likes and dislikes, hopes and fears, questions, experiences, styles, convictions, and feelings and how best to interact with certain individuals, please apply these insights liberally. But where other life factors or character traits outweigh generational trends, then be astute enough not to overemphasize the principles we delineate here. Yet even then, some of the elements typically underscored in generational research will apply and be helpful in knowing how best to relate to members of those cohorts, especially those that are not your own. Churches and ministries that fail to take into account the distinctions among the generations run the serious risk of being niche congregations only—serving, at best, one generation well. But they will not understand why they cannot attract or retain others from very different cohorts, or from specific phases of those cohorts.

Furthermore, in its early stages, most cultural research is based on samples of convenience. In the big scope of research, generational research is still very young, so that much of the data is based on convenience samples—meaning whomever the researchers can find.¹⁰ A small handful of researchers are starting to embark on larger-scale research projects that have the time (and budget) to attempt more representative and random sampling.¹¹ The research for this book takes its starting point from my doctoral dissertation but moves beyond it to interact with a wealth of scholarly and popular literature, both Christian and non-Christian, both religious and secular. What makes it particularly distinctive are the biblical evaluations Craig offers for the characteristics of each cohort. And, of course, the specifics of how I summarize the traits of each generation bring some necessary nuancing to the literature, while the suggestions for ministering to and with each cohort that both Craig and I have offered, as I noted above, do not closely overlap with other works available.¹²

10. Howe and Strauss, *Generations*, is considered the first major work addressing generational differences in the United States.

11. For example, David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011); and Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials* (Nashville: B&H, 2011).

12. The most important existing literature dealing with all three of the cohorts we discuss includes Paul Taylor, *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014); multiple works by Jean M. Twenge, esp. *Generation Me—Revised and Updated: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Atria, 2014); and Ron Zemke,

Comments on *Generational Culture*

Every generation takes for granted the good that went before it, reacts against the bad, and responds within its own historical context.¹³ It is a pattern that we as individual humans embody and therefore manifest in large-scale culture as well. Think about it: when you were growing up, there were rules or approaches to parenting that your parents implemented that just “worked” for you. As such, when you became a parent (or you think about how you would want to parent someday), those are the things you just assume you too will implement. Things such as curfews, family dinners, or sports participation may be parts of growing up that you see as amiable and beneficial to your development—you take for granted the good in them. But then there are those things you look back on and think, “I will never be the parent who . . . !” From discipline, to cliché sayings, to burdensome expectations, your approach to parenthood seeks to react against or intentionally act differently from what you experienced. Finally, you take in the messages in the larger society about what is “good” parenting—are children supposed to wear helmets when they ride bikes? Are infants supposed to sleep on their backs or their stomachs? While you are taking for granted the good and reacting against the bad, you are also responding to your own historical context. As we will see, this pattern holds true for Boomers, Xers, and Millennials alike, as each generation approaches life with its own collective personality. Because of this phenomenon, we will present the generations in chronological order, allowing for you as the reader to see how the generations react and respond to those that have gone before them.

A final thing to keep in mind is that *lived* experience is very different than *learned* experience.¹⁴ For example, the civil rights movement is an event that is significant to all American people, having drastically shaped the larger society. For many of you Baby Boomers, this was a *lived* experience; you have personal memories of what life was like before, during, and after desegregation. You

Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak, *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers in the Workplace* (New York: American Management Association, 2013).

13. While the phrase “generational culture” is my own, it comes from observing the comments made throughout the focus group discussions for my dissertation research in which participants would often reference a cause-and-effect perspective on their values, beliefs, and life choices connected to how they interpreted those of their parents and their parents’ generation. See Nesbit, “Generational Affiliation as a Component of Culture,” 18, 100, 133.

14. Although not a direct parallel, this concept overlaps with the educational literature on experience-based learning. For an educational explanation of how experiencing a phenomenon changes the way it is learned and understood, see Lee Andresen, David Boud, and Ruth Cohen, “Experience-Based Learning,” in *Understanding Adult Education and Training*, ed. Griff Foley, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001), 225–39.

have stories of people you knew and loved who were personally impacted by these events, not to mention your own personal experiences. For everyone who comes after Baby Boomers, desegregation and the 1960s civil rights movement are something we have *learned* about. We have heard stories about what life was like before and after these events, and we may even know people who were impacted by them. But we didn't hear their stories until ten, twenty, or even thirty years after they took place. Whatever these events taught Baby Boomers and however the events shaped them, we did not learn or experience them in the same way. We couldn't have; we weren't there. Regardless of the generational cohort, we must remember that those who come after us cannot understand our history as we do, for we lived it while they learned about it. Similarly, we must also recognize that two people from different generations can live through the same event, but because of their developmental age, they will experience it differently. For example, 9/11 is a lived experience for Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials (and was a significant enough event to mark the end of the birth years for the Millennial cohort). The impact of 9/11 on someone who was a forty-five-year-old Baby Boomer, who already had developed their worldview and sense of self, would have been significantly different than the impact it had on one who was a seven-year-old Millennial, who was unable to cognitively and emotionally differentiate between the first time the plane flew into the tower and all the replays they saw on television. Emotionally, such children would have felt as if the event were actually happening over and over again, drastically shaping their internalized sense of safety and security in the world.¹⁵

And We're Off!

It was my privilege and joy to write the first draft of this introduction, along with the first drafts of chapters 1, 4, 6, 7, and 9, providing a psychological and sociological snapshot of each generation and then providing the practical pastoral applications for working with Xers and Millennials. Craig wrote the first drafts of chapters 2, 3, 5, and 8, and the conclusion, offering a biblical and theological interaction with the defining features of each generation along with practical pastoral applications for working with Boomers. But we each read one another's first drafts, made numerous suggestions for improving the style, and reworked the content. These led to multiple revisions of each

15. Paramjit T. Joshi, Adair F. Parr, and Lisa A. Efron, "TV Coverage of Tragedies: What Is the Impact on Children?," *Indian Pediatrics* 45 (2008), <http://www.indianpediatrics.net/aug2008/aug-629-634.htm>.

segment, and each of us has reread the entire book; therefore together we stand by everything that the book asserts. On the other hand, because those revisions have not been so extensive as to blur the identity of the primary author of each segment, we often speak in the first-person singular. The first occurrence of such a convention in each chapter will be followed in parentheses with a reminder of who the “I” refers to.

We hope this little volume is accessible and useful for a wide group of readers, including ordinary churchgoers as well as leadership and clergy. It is unique in that it is based on one piece of extended field research and analyzed via state-of-the-art psychological and sociological methods, while at the same time addressing the everyday needs of the church and of Christians. Indeed, although aimed at a Christian audience, enough of its principles are sufficiently broad and broadly applicable to be of help to people of any or no religious outlook. All this contrasts markedly with the written resources currently available, most of which fall into one of two distinct categories. Either they are written at a popular level for a widespread readership but without the empirical research to give psychological and sociological validity, or they do fine with the technical scholarship specific to a particular domain or attribute but don’t make it understandable for a broad cross section of our society. We have attempted to do both in this small book.

We hope you enjoy the journey and find it both enlightening and inspiring. Each generation we look at brings to the table something of significant value and worth, something that the church body desperately needs. Each generation reflects a different part of God’s heart and vision for the world and has the potential to draw us all closer in our understanding of who he is and who he has called his people to be. We encourage you to read this book through two lenses. First, read to understand yourself—the strengths and the weaknesses of your cohort. Find camaraderie with your cohort as you reminisce about childhood novelties and bond over common experiences and understandings. But second, and most important, read to appreciate others. Be open to seeing what other generations bring that you don’t or can’t. Choose to bless those older and younger than you with grace and joy, recognizing that we are all one body with many parts (1 Cor. 12:12).



Boomers at Large

Loud, proud, and in charge! From the time of their birth, Baby Boomers have had a significant hand in shaping, influencing, and contributing to the defining elements of American culture. Eager to join together to promote a cause or fight an injustice, Boomers bring an optimism, idealism, and drive to life.¹ As we will see, much of what is commonly understood as “American culture” is actually representative of *Boomer* culture, as this enormous cohort has had that significant of an influence on American society over the past five decades.

The Oldest Child

In the family system that is American culture, the Boomer generation serves as the oldest child. While we are well aware that there have been plenty of generations to come before the Boomers, something happened culturally that allowed Boomers to really take hold of American society and make it their own, almost setting a “launch” or “reset” button that catapulted the culture

1. Karen Hart, “Generations in the Workplace: Finding Common Ground,” *MLO: Medical Laboratory Observer* 38, no. 10 (October 2006): 26.

forward. Similar to an oldest child within a family, Boomers acted like the firstborn who sets the precedent for family expectations and norms and in many ways represents the magnified values, beliefs, and worldview of their family. They often become the token or model child. Interestingly enough, the description psychologists give of an oldest child succinctly captures the defining characteristics that we see in Boomers as a group: “perfectionist, reliable, conscientious, a list maker, well organized, hard driving, a natural leader, critical, serious, scholarly, logical, doesn’t like surprises, a techie.”²

As we discussed in the introduction, not every individual Boomer will perfectly fit the characteristics of their generational cohort, but as a collective, generational descriptions consistently hold true.³ As we continue to unfold the values, beliefs, and worldview of Boomers, watch for the valuable and unique elements that make a Boomer a Boomer, while simultaneously letting the individual Boomers in your life say, do, think, feel, and believe in ways that deviate from their cohort. Each person you meet is shaped by both shared and individual identity, bonding over the shared humanness while delighting in individual uniqueness.

Boomers’ Place in the World

Born between 1946 and 1964, primarily to World War II–era parents, the Baby Boomer generation boasts a current membership of approximately 83 million members in the United States alone.⁴ Formerly the largest generational cohort in American history, the Boomers have had over half a century to make a loud and indelible mark on American culture. Boomers, by and large, are proud to be Boomers and see their generational identity as an integral part of their personal identity.

Getting their name from their place in history, the Boomer generation is identified as beginning with the “boom” in birth rates that occurred immediately following World War II (1946) and ending when the number of annual live births went back down below 3.8 million in 1964.⁵ Every generational

2. Kevin Leman, *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2009), 18.

3. Paul M. Arsenault, “Validating Generational Differences: A Legitimate Diversity and Leadership Issue,” *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 25, no. 2 (2004): 124–41; Hart, “Generations in the Workplace,” 26–27; Andrea Hershatter and Molly Epstein, “Millennials and the World of Work: An Organization and Management Perspective,” *Journal of Business Psychology* 25 (2010): 211–23.

4. Lindsay M. Howden and Julie A. Meyer, “Age and Sex Composition: 2010,” *2010 Census Briefs*, May 2011, 2.

5. Info Please, “Live Births and Birthrates, by Year,” *Information Please Database*, 2007, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005067.html>.

cohort is shaped by the shared, lived experiences that happen during key developmental times in the lives of its members, and Baby Boomers are no exception. If anything, Baby Boomers provide a quintessential example of how lived, shared experiences can shape a generation. When asked what events shaped their sense of themselves and their place in the world, Boomers listed defining national and international events such as the John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. assassinations, the moon landing, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the *Roe v. Wade* decision.⁶ While younger generations also identify these same events as critical times in American history, for Boomers they are significant *lived* experiences rather than simply significant historical events.

Baby Boomers, Media, and Technology

The presence and use of technology, and the perspectives on it, are also unique factors in how each generation sees themselves and their place in the world. For Boomers, technology grew as they grew. Let's take the older Boomers for example. Starting with a radio in their home as young children, they then moved to black-and-white television, to color television, to a top-loading VCR that popped up to receive a VHS tape (complete with a corded remote control), to a front-loading VCR (and cordless remote control), to a DVD player, to a plasma or LCD television with a Blu-Ray player and DVR, and finally to an HD or even 3-D television with a touch screen. To compare a radio to a 3-D touch-screen television is to truly see the technological advances and development that have happened during the life span of the Boomers. A similar comparison could be made with telephones (operator controlled to cellular), typing instruments (from typewriters to iPads with keyboards), music-playing devices (record players to iPods), and on and on.⁷ The technological world grew as Boomers grew, and in many ways it represents Boomers' drive toward growth and development. Going back to television in particular, Boomers have a lived experience of the introduction of television into everyday life that enables them to see and feel the unifying and frightening impact that television has had on their sense of self and the world, an impact unique to their cohort.

For Boomers, the introduction of television as a mainstay in the home simultaneously made the world larger and smaller. It became larger by bringing

6. Arsenault, "Validating Generational Differences," 133; Nicky Dries, Roland Pepermans, and Evelien De Kerpel, "Exploring Four Generations' Beliefs about Career: Is 'Satisfied' the New 'Successful'?", *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 23, no. 8 (2008): 910.

7. In fact, by the time this book is published, at least one of these items is likely to be out of date!

the events in New York City or Phnom Penh into the living room of rural Iowa farmers, expanding their sense of awareness and exposure to the broader world. This same act simultaneously made the world smaller, as news no longer came with a delay or simply with a narrative report; it was now relatively immediate, up close, and personal. One Boomer captured well the effects of television on the Boomer worldview by stating,

*Everybody, in all parts of the country, wherever we lived, watchin' the same TV: "Ah, this is how the people [live], this is what they wear, this is how they talk to each other." You know? I mean, the radio's one thing, but television and radio and music, and you know, all being exposed to these same things has a homogenizing effect.*⁸

Another Boomer spoke of additional unifying effects in that “[media] brought the world to us. Like before, we knew nothing about the world. And now, with, you know, all this technology it’s brought the world to us.” But Boomers also see the growth of technology as having negative repercussions, fostering fear and distrust. With more news and information sources available to the public, less certainty remained about whom or what could be trusted. As one Boomer put it, “You could trust Walter Cronkite, [now] everything’s got a spin-factor to it; you’ve really got to search to figure out what’s really happening, who’s really telling you the truth.” Because this is a recurring remark by Boomers, we’ll come back to the significance of Cronkite later in our discussion.

A Sense of Self in Comparison to Others

When asked to reflect on who as a cohort they see themselves to be, Baby Boomers stated that they saw themselves as “clearly the best generation” or at the least “the generation that was responsible for creating the best” (referring to the children of Boomers). It always makes me (Elisabeth) chuckle when I go to speak to different organizations about generational differences and introduce the Boomers. Almost without fail, someone in the crowd lets out a loud “Woohoo!” complete with arms raised and pointer fingers extended. There is something about being a part of this generation that stirs up a sense of pride and identity not found to the same degree in any of the other generational cohorts. More than either cohort that comes after them, Boomers communicate a sense of feeling connected with their generational identity

8. The values, beliefs, worldviews, and descriptions of Baby Boomers summarized in this chapter, as well as any otherwise undocumented quotations, can be found in Elisabeth A. Nesbit, “Generational Affiliation as a Component of Culture: Focus Group Perspectives of Three Generational Cohorts” (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, 2010), 15–32, 55–75.

and see this collective identity as something positive, powerful, and beneficial within their community.

United We Stand

A collective identity has fared well for Baby Boomers as they have engaged together in civil rights protests, education reform, and various other national-level advocacy movements throughout their lives. They have experienced the power of numbers and the change that can happen when people are united for a shared cause. The combined values of being responsible and accountable for their actions and influence in the world are key underpinnings to the Boomer identity and greatly influence their drive to collectively make change in their world. For this generation, collective activism on a large scale is not only important but foundational to their sense of self. They see themselves as system changers and system builders and deeply believe that persistence, determination, and a united voice will bring about the change they want to see in the world around them. They are the generation of sit-ins, picket signs, and marches on Washington, DC, not out of spite or a critical spirit but out of hope, optimism, and dedication to what they believe America can be.

When asked, Boomers often describe who they were based on how they differed from Generation Xers and Millennials. Specifically, they see themselves as possessing greater traits of accountability, integrity, and responsibility than younger cohorts, having more empathy and understanding for the effects of war, and being more intentional and dedicated to the work they do, whether in a vocation, volunteer position, or parenting. One Boomer captures the generation's sentiment by stating,

I think it's very, very important that if a person says they're going to do something, they're going to do it. And when I say I'm going to do something, I'm going to do it. And I think, real close to 100 percent of the time I live that, but some of these younger generations that you're also working with I don't think they have that same, even, meaning.

Significant People and Heroes

While Boomers criticize Xers and Millennials, they also speak of feeling sadness for the younger cohorts and for the lack of strong role models available to them within the family, community, or church. In comparison, Boomers have a sense of collective heroes—those individuals within political, military, social, and religious domains that became iconic models of who they aspired to be or represented the values and causes they held dear. Specific examples of Boomer

heroes include John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa.⁹ While Boomers recognize that these leaders may at times have been painted more mythically than they were in reality, they still have a shared, lived experience in which leaders were elevated above the average person. This experience of seeing leaders as slightly more godlike than the average person has allowed leaders to be mythologized to a degree, and in so doing cast a vision for the dream or hope of what Boomers could be. This sense of idealized heroism is unknown to younger cohorts who, when speaking of the heroes or role models given to them by older generations, express a sense of shattered dreams as every role model or hero given to them has been “deconstructed” rather than idealized.

One of the most fascinating pieces of Boomers’ shared identity to come out of my research was the shared understanding of who Walter Cronkite was and, more specifically, what he represents to Boomers. Whether talking about heroes, the role of media and technology, or the influences on worldview, Boomers time and again come back to Walter Cronkite. Sure, many will also admit that it was not Cronkite *personally*, but more what he represented in a broader sense that is significant to their sense of identity and place in the world. Nevertheless, Cronkite was a regular point of reference. For Boomers, the day Cronkite went off the air in 1981 was the end of an era, the end of feeling as if you could trust there to be a speaker or definer of truth within the culture. Xers also reference Cronkite’s role in providing a foundation for trust and truth, but, except for some older Xers, this reference was less a lived experience and more a historical understanding. Cronkite began his career in the 1930s and anchored the CBS Evening News from 1962 to 1981, eventually becoming identified as “the most trusted man in America.”¹⁰ Throughout his time on television, Cronkite delivered the news for nearly every key event throughout Boomers’ childhoods and young adulthoods, including the assassinations of Kennedy and King, the Vietnam War, the moon landing, Watergate, and the Iranian hostage crisis. No public figure or concept provides such a unifying identity for Xers and Millennials; both younger cohorts speak of never having known where or whom to turn to for truth, representing again the power of shared, lived experience.

Baby Boomer Values

More than any other cohort, Baby Boomers explain their behavior and pursuits in life as being rooted in core cohort-shared principles or values. These

9. Arsenault, “Validating Generational Differences,” 133.

10. Richard Galant, “The Most Trusted Man in America,” CNN.com, June 5, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/06/05/opinion/brinkley-walter-cronkite>.

principles influence relationships, domains, and seasons of life, truly permeating Boomers' sense of self and their understanding of how the world should work. As with every other generation, core values are both defined and reinforced by lived experiences. For Boomers, their core values and life-guiding principles came out of their experiences of growing up when the American economy was on the rise, there were more jobs than there were people to fill them, and personal and professional growth seemed unhindered by anything other than one's own self-imposed limitations.¹¹

Work Ethic and Personal Responsibility

In light of such a developmental environment, it is no wonder that Boomers regularly function from the value and belief that “with enough hard work, people can accomplish anything they want to,” and “if you work hard, you get ahead.” This perspective represents the Boomers' hope and optimism, rooted in their shared, lived experience that it is possible to start at the bottom of a company, organization, or social status and work your way up. For a Boomer, a work ethic is defined by the ability to undertake this journey to the top, steadfastly pursuing a goal or dream without being significantly deterred. It includes a sense of loyalty and determination, a willingness to go above and beyond the stated requirements, job description, and baseline expectations.¹²

Connected to the value of a work ethic is a sense of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency. These characteristics color every sphere of life for Boomers, whether in work, play, or relationships. Like the oldest child in a family, Boomers go through life carrying the weight of believing they are singlehandedly responsible for the welfare and success of themselves, their family, and whatever work they are involved in. This, on the one hand, has created a generation of people who are driven, responsible, accomplished, and trustworthy.¹³ On the other hand, it also has created a generation that struggles to retire or hand off responsibilities to others who may be more qualified, better suited, or simply less busy.¹⁴

11. Arsenault, “Validating Generational Differences,” 129; Valerie I. Sessa, Robert I. Kabacoff, Jennifer Deal, and Heather Brown, “Generational Differences in Leader Values and Leadership Behavior,” *Psychologist-Manager Journal* 10, no. 1 (2007): 50.

12. James B. Davis, Suzanne D. Pawlowski, and Andrea Houston, “Work Commitments of Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers in the IT Profession: Generational Differences or Myth?,” *Journal of Computer Information Systems* 46, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 44.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Jim Hater and Sangeeta Agrawal, “Many Baby Boomers Reluctant to Retire: Engaged, Financially Struggling Boomers More Likely to Work Longer,” *Gallup Economy*, January 20,

Equality

Three values that are interwoven for Baby Boomers are those of a passion for equality, a hatred of injustice, and a belief in hope and change. Growing up in the middle of the civil rights movement, this cohort is particularly sensitive to issues of racial and gender equality. While each generation that comes after the Boomers likewise values equality, the Boomers' shared, lived experience with the pursuit of this value is strikingly different than anything experienced by Xers and Millennials as cohorts. For Boomers, racial segregation and inequality were real and lived experiences and happened on scales unseen by future cohorts. One Caucasian Boomer shared her experience of growing up in Mississippi in the 1960s with the following story.

There was a lady named Katie Lee, who was a black lady who used to babysit us. And Katie Lee had to come stay with us while mother went with dad in the, well it wasn't even an ambulance, good-gosh it was a hearse because they didn't even have ambulances! But anyway, it came time to go to bed and I said to Katie Lee, "Well, mom and dad aren't here so why don't you just sleep in their bed." [Katie Lee said,] "Oh! I can't do that!" And I said, "Why not!?" [Katie Lee replied,] "I can't sleep in white folks' bed." And I said, "Where are you gonna sleep?" And she said, "I'm sleepin' on the living room floor." I said, "Then so am I!" And our little sister said, "Well then so am I!" and he [the brother] said, "Well I am too!" And we all just slept on the floor because it was like, you know I wasn't about to go crawl into bed and have Katie Lee who we loved and respected so much, sleep on the floor in our house!

A deep desire to be heard and to give voice to others who feel unheard characterizes a core value of Boomers. Tied into their sense of responsibility, Boomers see it as a personal responsibility, even an obligation, to confront injustice and promote equality, particularly as it pertains to issues of racial discrimination. Their belief in hope and change fuels their drive for activism. One Boomer captured this sentiment well by stating, "And you have to be optimistic to think that the change will have effect, and yet you have to be cautious, and somewhat an alarmist to get someone to get their butts in gear and do something." Instant change is not something Boomers expect; rather they are dedicated to causes and strive toward hope and change.

2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166952/baby-boomers-reluctant-retire.aspx>. Many of the Baby Boomers I have spoken with talk about this perception, particularly for those who have embedded their identity in their work. They do not trust that those who come after them are capable of doing what they have done or are as invested in the job as they have been.

Materialism

A generational cohort cannot exist without being influenced by the broader culture in which it lives, and Boomers are no different. As Americans, placing a value on materialism permeates nearly every facet of who we are. Sure, people may embrace this value to greater or lesser degrees, but it is part of the collective American identity nonetheless. As we will see, each cohort pursues and expresses this broader value in different ways. For Baby Boomers, materialism comes in an appreciation for big toys (i.e., cars, boats, lake cabins, etc.) and in accumulating wealth.¹⁵ Boomers make a stark distinction between what was their parents' money and what is their money, seeing financial freedom and accumulation as a sign of their ability to live out other values, such as their work ethic and self-sufficiency.

Ironically, many Boomers have coupled valuing financial success with their valuing of responsibility and have applied it to how they parent, often seeing it as their *responsibility* to take care of their children financially well into early adulthood. When asked, many Boomers explain this phenomenon by stating their desire to see their children have a better starting point in life than they had themselves, and they see their ability to provide financially as offering their children a leg up from where they started as young adults. Depending on one's perspective, this is where many Boomers take for granted the good of their upbringing (self-sufficiency producing drive and personal ownership), react against the bad (feeling alone and unable to rely on family for support), and respond within their own historical context (economic and social growth). We will see the impact of this decision by Boomers particularly when we explore the Millennial generation's characteristics.

As we look more deeply into the different spheres of life for Boomers, we will see many of these principles or values being lived out, whether in community, work, home, or the church. Behavior is purposeful; people do what they do for a reason, and that reason is often a drive to express both core values and the core value of a group or individual.

Boomers: Up Close and Personal

So far we have taken more of a big-picture view of the Baby Boomers, exploring the broad and overarching traits and values that characterize this influential generation. Now it's time to focus in and really explore who they

15. Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak, *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers in the Workplace* (New York: American Management Association, 2013), 71.

are in more intimate and personal spaces. In particular, who are Boomers within their social communities, workplaces, homes, and churches? How do their core values and principled living influence their presence, involvement, and engagement within these everyday contexts?

Baby Boomers in Community

When asked to explain their worldview, Baby Boomers had an interesting response, one unique from any other cohort I studied—they made distinctions between their view of the world as children and adolescents, and their view of the world now as adults. For Boomers, their sense of community and their place in the world has changed drastically over their life span, whereas Xers and Millennials have maintained a rather consistent worldview perspective. As Boomers grew, “the world got smaller, and life got bigger,” which then changed their ability to trust and feel safe in the world.¹⁶

CITIZENSHIP, PATRIOTISM, AND NATIONALISM

In the largest sense, Boomers feel like they are “citizen[s] of the world,” and as such are responsible and accountable for their contribution to this expansive, worldwide community. While this sense of being citizens of the world is acknowledged by Boomers, we will see other cohorts who actively engage this citizenship in more direct and interpersonal ways. For Boomers, an awareness of global connectedness is something they intellectually understand to a greater degree than their parents but not nearly to the degree of Xers, or especially Millennials. Boomers instead focus their sense of interpersonal connectedness and community on a more national to local level, and explain community as “my neighbors, the people right around me.” Connecting to values of responsibility, accountability, and self-sufficiency, Boomers understand that “if it’s not for you to volunteer in your community, you won’t have a community.”

A unique part of Boomers’ sense of community came in their discussions of patriotism and nationalism. This discussion consistently happened within Boomer focus groups and never once occurred among the younger generations.¹⁷ Despite their deep distrust of government, Boomers express great

16. Any unattributed quotations throughout this book are from the interviews used to complete this study.

17. Using a semistructured interview format, each focus group was permitted the opportunity to address topics significant to their specific group. In the Baby Boomer focus groups, topics of patriotism and nationalism organically emerged from the group discussion but were not mentioned by Generation Xers or Millennials during their focus groups.

patriotism and a sense of pride in and appreciation for military men and women. One Boomer captured the generation's sentiment by saying, "So it was, to me, there was never a question about the importance of the military, the value placed on our veterans. There was just never any question about that; it's just the way we lived. And I think we had such pride in our country and what we stood for."

While Boomers see the lack of support for veterans following the Vietnam War as deeply unpatriotic, they see their protests over the Vietnam War itself as acts of sincere patriotism. One Boomer clarified this by stating, "I believe that it is patriotic to try to tell your country when they're doing something you believe is wrong." Connecting to their values of responsibility and activism, Boomers feel a sense of responsibility and ownership in the shaping of American culture and government. This sense of patriotism that moves Boomers to speak up, protest, and challenge government decisions is undergirded by their values of hope and change. They believe that "we can be victorious over anything we want to, any challenges in this country." One Boomer explained the role these overlapping values have in her life by stating, "I've laughed in the last dozen years; who thought back in 1965 you'd still be on a protest march in Washington, DC? An anti-war march! But, you know, I'm still doin' it, and probably always will. I can't envision my life without having that as a part of it: to be active, to participate in things."

Boomers' sincere love for the United States of America and hope for what it could be also motivates their activism and involvement in government concerns. As one Boomer summarized, "We were very proud of our country, we [have] a good sense of our nationalism, and helping society is very dear to us."

Now let us clarify. Boomers' patriotism and love of the United States do not translate into a love, respect, or appreciation for *American government*. From the early days of this generation's existence, part of their seemingly innate nature was a lived tension between respect for authority and a simultaneous deep distrust of authority. Particularly as it pertains to a distrust of government, Boomers repeatedly go back to the Vietnam War as an example of their anger and distrust with statements such as, "I think what the Vietnam War did, it created a suspicion of the government and the decision that they were making, that maybe they really weren't in our best interest." Much of Boomers' distrust and resentment toward governmental authority comes out of feeling betrayed by government decisions and reflects more a sentiment of having *lost* trust in the government than never having had trust. This feeling again reflects Boomers' view of "then versus now" in how they see the world.

EXPECTATIONS OF AUTHORITY

Ironically to anyone in a younger cohort, Boomers' distrust of government often gets coupled with a belief that America is a Christian nation and that the government should reflect Christian values.¹⁸ Interestingly, there appears to be little consensus as to what kind of "Christian" Boomers are hoping for but simply that government decisions should be made in such a way as to provide the greatest benefit to the Christian segment of the population. From an outsider's perspective, it can often appear as if Boomers believe that we, as Americans, have replaced Israel as God's chosen people and that our government should reflect such a redesignation.¹⁹ Similar to every generation that holds seemingly contradictory values, Boomers' distrust of government seems to come out of their disappointment that our government is not reflecting the Christian values that it "should."

Beyond government authority, Boomers have lost trust in pretty much all authority at various points throughout their development—at least all authority that isn't theirs or that they didn't have a hand in creating! As we will see within the discussions of Boomers at home and in the church, a sense of who is trustworthy and dependable drastically shifted between "then" and "now" in Boomer development. One Boomer described her loss of trust in authority:

Yeah, I distinctly recall the day it kind of dawned on me that there, like, really wasn't anybody in charge. You thought when you were a little kid: somebody was watching this whole deal and they had it figured out. And then you finally realize, you see, like, well God, dad ran out of gas; that's not real bright. And then you see something else, and then you, you know, you hear a rumor about the preacher doing something ugly, and you know what I mean? The more exposure you have to being able to understand what happens with the president and the world leaders and stuff like that, you just like, "Aaahh! There's just nothing going on that's very good."

18. The founding of the Moral Majority by Jerry Falwell in 1979 is seen by many as the movement that brought significant attention to the issue of religion in politics (see "People and Ideas: Jerry Falwell," *God in America*, PBS.org, October 11, 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/people/jerry-falwell.html>). Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), provides a history of the development of the Christian right in American society.

19. Southern Baptist blogger Laura Coulter addresses this observation and challenges it with a Millennial's view of America as Babylon in "Living in Babylon: How Millennials View the Church and Culture," *Laura Coulter Writes* (blog), July 22, 2014, <http://www.lauracoulterwrites.com/babylon/>. Conrad Cherry, in his book *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), compiles thirty-one different historical readings that speak to the belief that America has a unique and prized position as God's chosen land.

Now, there is an exception for Boomers' distrust of authority, and this exception is evoked when *they* are the ones in power. Of the three generations we are looking at, Boomers value hierarchy and clear leadership structures more than the younger two cohorts.²⁰ Additionally, they expect that the respect as well as the distrust that they hold toward authority is also being extended toward them. What many Boomers have trouble understanding is that neither of the younger generations hold the same level of respect for authority that Boomers do, and that Xers and Millennials feel distrust for vastly different reasons.

Baby Boomers at Work

With Baby Boomers' entrance into the workforce, the concept of "workaholicism" was also introduced to American society.²¹ Today Boomers work an average of fifty-five hours per week.²² Prior to their arrival, working long days and rarely taking vacation was done for survival, not because identity and sense of self were inextricably linked to career. More than any other generational cohort, Boomers see their identity as being deeply connected with their profession.²³ For example, let's say you go to a neighborhood block party and start making small talk with Joe from down the street. You say to your new acquaintance, "So, Joe, tell me about yourself." If Joe is a Baby Boomer, he will, in all likelihood, answer this question by first telling you what his profession is and will also include the name of the company or organization he works for. He may also include his title and how long he has worked for that particular company or in that particular field. This is a vastly different answer from what you would hear from Joe the Gen-Xer or Joe the Millennial, which we will see in future chapters. For Joe the Baby Boomer, a primary piece of his identity is connected to his work.

20. Dogan Gursoy, Thomas A. Maier, and Christina G. Chi, "Generational Differences: An Examination of Work Values and Generational Gaps in the Hospitality Workforce," *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 27 (2008): 451.

21. Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak, *Generations at Work*, 84.

22. Terri Manning, Bobbie Everett, and Cheryl Roberts, "The Millennial Generation: The Next Generation in College Enrollment" (Charlotte, NC: Central Piedmont Community College, 2007), slide 14.

23. Sue Fleschner, "Counseling across Generations: Bridging the Baby Boomer, Generations X, and Generations Y Gap," in *Compelling Counseling Interventions: Celebrating VISTAS' Fifth Anniversary* (Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association, 2008), 140; Betty R. Kupperschmidt, "Addressing Multigenerational Conflict: Mutual Respect and Carefronting as Strategy," *Online Journal of Issues in Nursing* 11, no. 2 (2006), http://www.nursingworld.org/MainMenuCategories/ANAMarketplace/ANAPeriodicals/OJIN/TableofContents/Volume112006/No2May06/tpc30_316075.html.

PAY YOUR DUES

Out of their respect for hierarchical structure, the belief that hard work pays off, and the value of self-sufficiency, Boomers go about work from a “pay your dues” perspective.²⁴ Over the decades they have worked themselves into positions of authority, management, and status and expect the same approach from younger generations. While Boomers may distrust and dislike most authority, when the authority is theirs, they often feel entitled to such positions and privileges. They believe they have “paid their dues,” and now it’s their turn.

Baby Boomers bring to the workplace a sense of loyalty and dedication to an organization that is truly unique.²⁵ Stemming from their value of collective identity, Boomers very much identify with the companies, organizations, and groups they choose to be a part of. Boomers entered the workforce when full benefits, retirement, and pensions were assumed. Dedication to a company meant the company in turn would be dedicated to the employee, rewarding thirty or forty years of service with a pension and a gold watch. While this expectation has not remained true throughout their lifetime, it was the starting expectation for many, and a lived memory exists when this expectation was a reality. For younger generations, retirement with a pension is simply a story we hear that happened once upon a time; it is not part of our lived experience. One Boomer shared her journey with the dissolution of this expectation in the following story.

I retired from IBM, and when I started with IBM, I mean, I still got it. I can go home and find it. I signed an agreement with them and they were going to pay: here’s how your pension will be calculated in thirty years, and [here] we’re going to pay for your medical care for life, and all that. And as you got into it, starting in the ’90s, oh, that’s not true anymore, we’re going to change our minds, we’re not going to do that anymore; we’re going to cut like one-third of your pension, we’re not going to give you what we’ve promised you all these friggin’ years, twenty-some years, we told you this is what your pension’s going to be. Well that’s not true anymore.

For many Boomers, their value and expectation of loyalty collide with their respect and distrust of authority as we look at their work experiences.

Boomers came into the workforce at a time when it appeared as if nothing was impossible if one had enough dedication, determination, and drive. Throughout their careers, many Boomers demonstrated the possibilities of

24. Hart, “Generations in the Workplace,” 26.

25. Ibid.

such determination and drive as the growing economy created the perfect space for them to start at the bottom of an organization and work into the role of at least vice president, rising above the social class of their parents, relatively early in their adulthood. This pay-your-dues approach to work and leadership is a double-edged sword for Boomers. On the one hand it demonstrates an ability to set a long-term goal and see the steps needed to get there, to work for deferred gratification and to function well within a structured hierarchy. On the other hand this approach can leave little room for out-of-the-box thinking; it can ignore or deny a younger upstart who may truly be more skilled or gifted; and it can reward longevity over genuine ability and skill.

FINANCIAL MOTIVATION

More than the generations after them, Boomers are motivated in work by financial benefits.²⁶ Time and again I have anecdotally heard this confirmed in the consulting work I do. Usually, the confirmation comes in the form of a Baby Boomer supervisor or manager who is struggling to motivate younger employees and so offers them a financial bonus or some sort of financial reward. To the Boomer's surprise, the younger employee seems unimpressed (and perhaps ungrateful from a Boomer perspective) and instead proceeds to ask for more time off. To the Boomer, incentives and rewards often come in the form of cash, a year-end bonus, or even a promise of long-term *financial* payoff, such as retirement. To a Gen-Xer or Millennial, money just simply does not create the same motivation, incentive, or appeal as it does for many Boomers.²⁷

FROM THE TOP DOWN

Another key characteristic of Baby Boomers in the workplace is the way they manage and like to be managed. "It's all good unless you hear otherwise" is a foundational principle of Boomer management. Feedback for most Boomers is meant for annual reviews or for when someone is not performing according to expectation. Beyond that, expressions of affirmation, appreciation, validation, or encouragement are not expected, sought, or abundantly given. Boomers approach their workspace with their values of self-sufficiency and responsibility, and their respect and appreciation for structure and hierarchy deeply influence their expectations and preferences. The generation that most prefers lists, meetings, and micromanaging, Boomers communicate with other

26. Greg Hammill, "Mixing and Managing Generations," *FDU Magazine Online* (Winter/Spring 2005), table 2: Personal and Lifestyle Characteristics by Generation, <http://www.fdu.edu/newspubs/magazine/05ws/generations.htm>.

27. *Ibid.*, table 3: Workplace Characteristics.

employees often but usually for the purpose of giving instruction, correction, or providing needed facts.²⁸ Additionally, Boomers expect information and communication to flow from the top down rather than from the bottom up. If power, respect, and authority are earned by paying your dues, then it is those at the top who have earned the right to be heard.²⁹ We will see that younger generations bring a great need for positive feedback, encouragement, and more holistic and egalitarian communication that is as much bottom-up as it is top-down.³⁰

THE WRESTLE WITH RETIREMENT

For many Boomers, their identity-informed dedication to work combined with their value of self-sufficiency has made them rather self-focused and reluctant to retire. The plans they once had for what life after sixty-five would look like have dramatically changed. Many Boomers are finding that they cannot or will not retire, either because the economy over the past decade no longer allows them to retire as planned, or because they are now helping raise grandchildren, or because they find themselves as primary caretakers for aging parents, or simply because they cannot envision who they would be without their work.³¹ In the business world, this is particularly evident as I talk with Boomers in middle to upper management. Time and again I hear them express a tension between not wanting to retire for fear of who they will be or of no one else being truly able to carry on the work or legacy they have created thus far, and yet desperately wanting to cash in and reap the benefits of their decades of work and dedication. As a counselor, what I hear about most is the fear of losing identity, but as a management consultant what I hear most about is the fear of who is worthy of continuing the legacy of the Boomers.

This brings us to the flip side of Boomers' dedication to self-sufficiency: Boomers struggle to mentor and plan for the "hand-off" that must happen as one generation looks to move out and another looks to move in. Boomers, in many ways, have been so busy and so focused on their success and goals that they have not planned for what it will look like to pass the baton to future generations. Therefore, in addition to financial pressures keeping them from retiring, a lack of planning for legacy building and an overemphasis on

28. Gursoy, Maier, and Chi, "Generational Differences," 455–56.

29. *Ibid.*, 451.

30. *Ibid.*, 455.

31. Mary Finn Maples and Paul C. Abney, "Baby Boomers Mature and Gerontological Counseling Comes of Age," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 84 (Winter 2006): 4–5; George James, "In Person: A Survival Course for the Sandwich Generation," *New York Times*, January 17, 1990, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/17/nyregion/in-person-a-survival-course-for-the-sandwich-generation.html>.

self-sufficiency are leaving many Boomers in an identity crisis and panic as they reach retirement age.

TRUE MENTORS, WANNA-BES, AND TALKERS

We will talk more about the value of mentorship when we discuss Millennials, but what is important to note here is that many Boomers have told me they love the idea of mentoring and fully embrace or support this notion. The problem comes when I ask Boomers who they actually mentor and what they think mentoring is. I have seen Boomers take one of three general approaches to these questions: the true mentors, the wanna-bes, and the talkers.³² The first category is the small group of Boomers who are true mentors, taking the time to individually invest in someone younger, to pass on what they know and how they know it in a way that is personable and applicable to their mentorees. One example is the creation of this book, in which Craig (a senior faculty member) came to me (when I was a first-year faculty member) and asked what my career goals were and who I felt God was calling me to be. In that conversation he heard and saw who I was and offered support, investment, and mentorship by sharing his expertise, experience, and wisdom in a way that was personal and purposeful to who I am and who God is shaping me to be. Such an amazing gift! Another mentor of mine put words to this approach as she talked about her role as a counseling supervisor by saying,

My job as a supervisor is to help make you a better clinician than either you or I could be on our own. I will share with you who I am and what I have learned and experienced over the years, and you will bring your own giftings, experiences, and training, and together you will leave with more than either of us have on our own. The student should surpass the teacher.³³

True mentors such as these are able and willing to share not just what they know but also *who they are*, and they do so within the context of understanding their mentorees and who God is shaping those mentorees to be.

The second category of mentors is the wanna-bes. The wanna-bes will say that mentoring is important and will even tell you that they do mentor, but their version of mentoring leaves much to be desired. Instead of coming

32. See Jeff Myers, *Cultivate: Forming the Emerging Generation through Life-on-Life Mentoring* (Dayton, TN: Passing the Baton International, 2010), for a thorough description of good and bad mentoring, along with resources for effectively mentoring younger generations.

33. I am truly indebted to Dr. Joan Burgess Wells for her investment in my life as a clinician, as an educator, and as a person.

alongside a younger person, learning what the mentoree needs and how the mentor might facilitate that growth, the wanna-bes often come in more like a drill sergeant or lecturer. The wanna-bes may have good motives or self-seeking motives in their approach, but either way the effect is one of a top-down, “listen to me” approach. A well-intended wanna-be often shares stories, anecdotes, and “words of wisdom” out of a desire to save the mentoree from the hurts, hurdles, and struggles that the wanna-be has experienced, or to encourage the mentoree to take a similar path that the wanna-be took, assuming that the journey of the mentoree will closely mirror his or her own. A self-seeking wanna-be often shares advice, corrections, and reprimands from a position of authority, believing on some level that age, experience or position has earned him or her the right to “share” such insights with a younger coworker or employee and is therefore a mark of status, power, or superiority. It is important to note that most wanna-bes are well intended and would express a desire to mentor well, but their top-down perspective on mentorship often communicates a patronizing and disrespectful attitude toward the value of the mentoree.

The final category of mentors is the talker. Talkers are the Boomers who *say* mentoring is important and valuable but never actually do anything to personally share and invest in a younger person close to them. The talkers may have good intentions and know that mentoring is important, but they are caught up with more personal or pressing needs that leave them little time to invest in others in this way. Or perhaps their own self-doubt and insecurity keep them from believing that they truly have something to pass on to the next generation. At the same time, the talkers may have more self-seeking intentions, where their value of self-sufficiency and personal accomplishment overrides their desire, value, or ability to look outside themselves and pass on part of their legacy to someone younger. The self-seeking talkers see mentorship as something that could threaten their success or legacy rather than something that could strengthen and carry on all that they have accomplished.

In many ways, the current social norms, expectations, and standards of “work” in the United States were set by Baby Boomers. A generation that fought against “the man” and rebelled against “the system” has succeeded in creating its own system and rising to the top of the power structure. The workplace as most Americans understand it has been designed, created, and dominated by Boomers for more than forty years. As Boomers retire, it will be interesting to see whether they can effectively mentor the younger generations and hand off their legacy, or if the younger generations’ values and perspectives will simply step in to fill the void as Boomers leave the workplace.

Baby Boomers at Home

Who is your family? For Baby Boomers the traditional answer of blood relatives is still the most prevailing response. For Boomers, even if they dislike their family, have been hurt by their family, or have moved halfway across the country to get away from their family, there is still an expressed loyalty to blood relatives that is unique among the three generational cohorts.³⁴ As we will also see in the younger generations, Boomers express a sentiment that family is both blood or marriage-based relatives and the people you “picked up” along the way. But what is unique to Boomers in this is that they start their explanation of family as being based in blood or marriage-based relationships and then move out to chosen family later in their descriptions and conversations.³⁵ For younger generations, this explanation is often reversed, starting with chosen family and then acknowledging what role (if any) blood or marriage-based family plays. Additionally, Boomers express a sense of responsibility to their families and talk about the sense of belonging and identity they received from their families. One stated, “You had responsibility in your family, . . . you were relied on, . . . you knew your place in the family. You didn’t ever have to question that, you were part of it.”

GROWING UP BOOMER

In understanding what home means to Boomers, it is important to look at the homes Boomers grew up in and the homes Boomers created. We will start with the homes they were born into. Boomers grew up at a time when the nuclear family was still the national norm, with a two-parent home where Mom stayed home and Dad was the primary breadwinner.³⁶ Many of them were the children of Depression-era parents and World War II veterans. In 1960, there were only 25.8 divorces for every one hundred marriages, and the average family had 2.3 children.³⁷ This shared experience for Boomers of what “family” looked like was the last of an era, as the family composition of Generation Xers and Millennials took on very different forms.

34. This phenomenon was repeatedly seen and expressed in the interviews I conducted with Baby Boomers. See Nesbit, “Generational Affiliation as a Component of Culture,” 56–75.

35. *Ibid.*, 65.

36. Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America’s Largest Generation* (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 10; Manning, Everett, and Roberts, “Millennial Generation,” slide 13.

37. This is approximately half the rate of divorce that younger generations grew up under. See “Marriages and Divorces, 1900–2009,” *Information Please Database* (2007), <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005044.html>; Jennifer Cheeseman Day, “Changing Families, Changing Workforce,” *PAA Webinar*, United States Census Bureau, December 13, 2011, slide 7, <http://www.populationassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/Changing-Families-Changing-Workforce.pdf>.

Many Boomers I interviewed described the parenting style in which they were raised as more authoritarian, detached, and having a lack of emotional connection between parent and child. One Boomer described her family environment by stating, “I knew they loved me, I guess, because they kept me fed, and watered—and sheltered and everything. But there was not much affection at all.” Although many described a similar emotional detachment in their homes, the sense of family responsibility and loyalty is captured in one Boomer’s statement that “there was never the doubt there that if I needed my parents that they were there. I mean, there was always that. I knew in my heart and I believed it. You know, if something happened to me, my parents were always there. They would be there. Now, kids don’t have that.”

For many Boomers, a sense of belonging and protection came with being a part of their family, even if it did not come with the relational warmth and attachment that Boomers then tried to bring into the families they created.

THE HOUSE THAT BOOMERS BUILT

When Boomers became parents, they did what every other generation does: they took for granted the good, reacted against the bad, and responded within their own historical context. In homes parented by Boomers, a very different picture emerges than that which was found during Boomers’ childhood. Having grown up in an era focused on personal growth and development, many Boomers chose to delay having children. In many ways they saw children as the pinnacle of their personal accomplishments and wanted to bring children into a better financial situation than that in which they themselves were raised.³⁸ The children of Boomers are predominantly the younger half of the Gen-Xers and the older half of the Millennials.

Over a span of two decades, the median age for a first marriage in the United States demonstrated Boomers’ tendency to delay marriage in comparison to previous generations. In 1956, the median age for marriage was 20.1 for women and 22.5 for men, representative of the Silent generation, and the average family had 3.59 people.³⁹ In 1970 the median ages for a first marriage started to slowly rise with early Boomers—20.8 for women and 23.2 for men (making their median birth years 1950 for women and 1947 for

38. Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 77; Manning, Everett, and Roberts, “The Millennial Generation,” slide 26.

39. Gary R. Lee and Krista K. Payne, “Changing Marriage Patterns Since 1970: What’s Going On, and Why?,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 41, no. 4 (2010): 538; “U.S. Households, Families, and Married Couples, 1890–2006,” *Information Please Database* (2007), <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005055.html>.

men), and the average family consisted of 3.58 people.⁴⁰ In 1990, the median age of first marriages in the United States had jumped for both genders by nearly three years, with women being 23.9 (early Xers, born 1966) and men being 26.1 (late Boomers, born 1964), while the average family dropped in number to 3.17 people.⁴¹

It was the Boomer parents who introduced their children to bike helmets and rubber playground equipment, who introduced their cars to “Baby on Board” stickers, and who introduced higher education to the concept of “helicopter parents.”⁴² Boomers, as parents, spoke often of intentionally and consciously pushing against the model they grew up under, wanting their children to experience a relational connection that they themselves felt they missed out on in childhood. Boomers who were raised under more strict and authoritarian parents chose to parent from the position of being their child’s friend, actively avoiding saying such things as “because I’m the parent, that’s why” to their children. As such, the children of Boomers were often given explanations for every rule and instruction and were also brought into the parenting process in a more collaborative way than Boomers themselves had been parented.

On the other hand, Boomer families fell apart far more often than had their families of origin. For a generation whose focus in life was more likely to be on personal growth and satisfaction, commitments to marriage and family were often seen as hindrances to their personal development, especially if it meant being “unhappy.” Astonishingly, in 2010, 35 percent of all Baby Boomers had been divorced, and that number only seems to be rising.⁴³ For better or worse, Baby Boomers changed the face of the American family by

40. Lee and Payne, “Changing Marriage Patterns,” 547; “U.S. Households,” *Information Please Database*.

41. Lee and Payne, “Changing Marriage Patterns,” 547; “U.S. Households,” *Information Please Database*.

42. Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Go to College* (Great Falls, VA: American Association of Registrars and Admissions Officers and LifeCourse Associates, 2003), 11, define “helicopter parents” as “always hovering—ultra-protective, unwilling to let go, enlisting ‘the team’ (physician, lawyer, psychiatrist, professional counselors) to assert a variety of special needs and interests” on behalf of their children. It has become commonplace enough that Merriam-Webster includes the term with the following definition: “a parent who is overly involved in the life of his or her child.” It is most often used to describe parents’ involvement in their child’s educational process, but it is becoming more and more common in workplace literature describing the parents of Millennials.

43. Richard Schlesinger, “Why Are So Many Baby Boomers Divorced?,” *CBS Evening News*, December 14, 2010, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/why-are-so-many-baby-boomers-divorced/>; Susan L. Brown and I-Fen Lin, “The Gray Divorce Revolution: Rising Divorce among Middle-Aged and Older Adults, 1990–2010,” *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 67, no. 6 (2012): 731–41.

promoting the importance of personal growth and camaraderie in marriage while also promoting an attitude of selfishness and self-interest above all else.

Baby Boomers in Church

Within American culture, the topic of religion and/or spirituality is still relevant and of high value, even if formal affiliation is waning. Every generational cohort I interviewed wanted to discuss this topic and how their views and values surrounding it differ from the generations around them. It is interesting to note how differently each generation defines the topics of religion and spirituality and how passionate they are about how they came to that understanding. Baby Boomers are no different in this passion.

I HATE YOU, DON'T LEAVE ME

In each generation there are differing opinions on important topics such as politics and religion. The Boomers find themselves split between two seemingly opposed positions pertaining to religion but united in their passion and general intentionality about the topic. On the one hand, you have the Boomers who vocally and definitively pushed against the religion of their youth and organized religion as they saw it in the broader American culture, defining for themselves a personal spirituality that was often grounded in principles of humanism and self-growth. This group of Boomers tended to live out more of the distrust of authority and organizations and placed a strong value on self-sufficiency. On the other hand, you will also find a group of Boomers who more prominently lived out the value of collective identity and strongly identified themselves with a religious tradition or even a specific denomination. For this second subset of Boomers, denominational affiliation and church membership are of more importance, something that is rarely seen and often adamantly avoided by younger generations.⁴⁴

Respect coupled with distrust not only captures Boomers' sentiment about governmental authority but also succinctly captures their perspective on religion. For the subset of Boomers who rejected organized religion, many referenced fallen religious leaders or what they perceived to be inconsistent teachings as their reasons for distrust. For those who stayed involved or found a new way to get involved in organized religion, the value of respect for authority and pay-your-dues leadership often helps to soften, but not remove, the distrust.

More than any other cohort I talked with, Boomers spoke about having been involved with or significantly influenced by organized religion at some

44. Peter Menconi, *The Intergenerational Church: Understanding Congregations from WWII to WWW.com* (Littleton, CO: Mt. Sage Publishing, 2010), 84.

point in their lives. For many Boomers, more traditional forms of Christianity provided a baseline of beliefs that was used as a springboard for the exploration of other religions and forms of spirituality. Where younger cohorts spoke of having knowledge or interest in other religions, picking and choosing pieces they liked and rarely wanting to affiliate themselves with a formalized label or organized religious identity, Boomers spoke more of actively engaging and exploring different religions in their full or formalized form. While Boomers attach to organized religion more readily than younger generations, they still pick and choose more than the generations who went before them.⁴⁵ The first generation to truly embrace and express the idea that one could be spiritual without being religious, the Boomers brought religion into the public domain and started to challenge the idea that topics of religion were taboo in social settings.⁴⁶

In their distrust of authority, Boomers pushed against the institutional religions of their childhood and sought the “freedom to make the choice to find the religion and decide for themselves.” Wade Roof reports that “nearly two-thirds of all boomers reared in a religious tradition dropped out of their churches and synagogues during their teens or early twenties.”⁴⁷ The Boomers I interviewed reflected this same trend, having pushed against the primarily Christian religious beliefs of their parents and going on to explore or participate in other forms of spirituality. Many I interviewed also spoke of returning to those same beliefs in mid-life, either for the sake of their children or because they discovered a new form of their previous faith, often by way of a different denomination. Even for those who spoke of returning to organized religion, there was still a sense of hurt and disappointment in the loss of trust they had once had for such authority. One Boomer reflected this hurt and confusion in speaking of her Catholic background by saying, “They started changing the rules of their religion; I think you’re going to see people questioning their beliefs. . . . This church has been telling me this all along, how can they just now change their mind?”

PUTTING PIECES TOGETHER

In my conversations with Boomers, time and again they brought discussions about religion and spirituality back to morality and “traditional values,” such as “kindness,” “being compassionate,” having “a clear sense of right and wrong,” and “good manners.” They talked about how they still hold to the values and principles they learned through organized religion in their childhood

45. *Ibid.*, 83.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 154.

but also of a struggle with where or how to apply those values. Specifically, one Boomer explained how as he aged he was becoming “convinced that the old values were right, but,” he added, “I don’t know how we can apply them and get to them exactly.”

For many Baby Boomers, religion is still a topic and an experience that is in flux and under exploration. Boomers bring their love of personal growth and self-improvement to this domain of their life, and as a cohort are not stagnant or disengaged in this journey. Regardless of specific beliefs held, nearly every Boomer I interviewed spoke of the significance that religion and/or spirituality holds in their life, even if they were uncertain as to the specific role it plays.

Where Career and Church Collide

For many Baby Boomers, life is compartmentalized: family, work, and church all function as separate domains of life, and integration can be quite challenging. While it could be argued that hierarchies have been established since the beginning of Israel’s history to distinguish “sacred” work from “secular” work, Boomers live out this dichotomy more boldly than either Xers or Millennials in today’s society.⁴⁸ For a generation of people that ties their worth and identity to what they do, Boomers who hold positions in full-time ministry have their identity all the more wrapped up in their work. On the flip side, those who pursue careers in fields such as accounting or carpentry are often left to feel as if their career is somehow less holy or sacred. This falsehood, on both sides of the fence, amplifies Boomers’ struggles with retirement and their sense of self-worth. It also complicates their feelings toward the church, as vocational ministry has become intricately interwoven with personal worth.

Conclusion

The oldest child, and to date the loudest voice in American culture, the Baby Boomers have shaped American culture in significant and undeniable ways. The value placed on collective identity, coupled with a drive toward self-sufficiency, has launched Boomers into positions of power and influence, both individually and as a cohort. Leaders in business, politics, the community,

48. Understandably, in the Old Testament, the role of priest was a set-apart profession within Israel, and yet God still saw and recognized the work of mason and craftsman as a spiritual job that was simultaneously an act of worship. See Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 249. In the New Testament, Paul also challenges this dichotomy in his metaphor of the body (1 Cor. 12:12–31) and through his own tent-making (Acts 18:3).

their families, and religious institutions, Boomers today find themselves in influential positions where they can and must choose the final legacy they will leave for future generations.

Boomers bring to the community a strong sense of collective identity and a lived history that has seen collectivism move societal mountains. A major force in the defining of American culture, Boomers now face their older years and the reality that they will not live forever. In the workplace, Boomers have created empires, mastered managerial processes, and implemented systems of efficiency and productivity. As younger cohorts have entered the workforce, Boomers are now being confronted with the ways in which their hierarchical leadership, which expects the younger generations to pay their dues, impacts those who were raised within a more egalitarian environment.

In their families, Boomers have placed great value on the role of women, have elevated companionship and happiness in marriage, and have fostered personal growth and development. Simultaneously, they have left us with scars from divorce, self-seeking pleasure, and materialism at the expense of relationships. In their churches, Boomers have had the privilege of being the primary audience for multiple decades. Now, as Boomers reach retirement and begin to pass on the torch of leadership to younger generations, what legacy will they choose to leave behind? Where will Boomers bless the younger generations? Where will they bemoan the younger generations? How will they choose to influence those who follow?