The Six Commandments of the Boomers

by Todd Wilken

You said you’d never compromise
With the mystery tramp, but now you realize
He’s not selling any alibis
As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes
And ask him do you want to make a deal?
—Bob Dylan, 1961

Worldviews have consequences.

I was recently in the former East German city of Halle. The main highway through Halle is lined with communist-era apartment buildings. These buildings are all prefabricated, all nondescript, all depressingly bleak.

These buildings accurately reflect the communist worldview—a worldview designed to stifle aspiration, to smother individualism, and to strangle the human spirit. Even ten years of post-communist renovation and remodeling has not yet erased the message of the communist worldview, “You are nothing, the State is god.”

The latent despair of communism lingers to some extent in a whole generation of former East Germans born after World War II. Worldviews do have consequences.

No less consequential is the worldview of a generation of Americans born after World War II—the Baby Boomer generation.

Who are the Baby Boomers?

In the year after World War II (1946) the birthrate in the United States jumped almost 20%. In 1947 it jumped another 12%. The birthrate continued to rise and finally peaked with 4.3 million babies born in 1957. By 1965 the birthrate had returned to normal. All said, between 1946 and 1964, 77 million babies were born in America. Those 77 million babies are the Baby Boomers. Today the Boomers are 28% of the US population.

But the Boomers are more than a statistical anomaly in the US birthrate. Believe me, they are much more.

How do I know this? I know this because I am a Boomer—technically at least. I was born in the last year of the Baby Boom. Granted, I have found myself at odds with my generation, I have avoided association with it, I have even tried to secede from it. But I remain a Boomer.

Timothy Leary, Harvard professor turned LSD advocate wrote in 1969, “The current generation is the brightest, holiest, bravest, and most curious of any generation in human history.” And again in 1970 he wrote: “Human beings born after 1943 belong to a different species from their progenitors.”

Leary wasn’t the only one who thought so. In fact, it might be said that Leary’s opinion of the Boomer generation is the Boomers’ own worldview in a nutshell.

Now, a lot can change in 30 years. Lately, opinions have changed about the Boomers. In fact, criticism of the Boomers has reached a fevered pitch. Ralph Whitehead Jr. has observed:

The baby boom was a self-absorbed generation, a generation that defined itself not through sacrifice as its parents had, but through indulgence.
And even Paul Begala, a former political consultant for President Bill Clinton, has recently written:

I’ve spent my whole life swimming behind that garbage barge of a generation. They ruined everything they’ve passed through and left me in their wake.... At the risk of feeding their narcissism, I believe it’s time someone stated the simple truth: The Baby Boomers are the most self-centered, self-seeking, self-interested, self-absorbed, self-indulgent, self-aggrandizing generation in American history. I hate the Boomers.

Ouch. But isn’t that rather obvious? Can’t we say anything more specific about the Boomers than that they are self-centered, self-seeking, self-interested, self-absorbed, self-indulgent and self-aggrandizing?

The Boomerview.

How do you objectively summarize the Boomer worldview?

Every worldview has a center of gravity, a unifying principle, an hermeneutic for understanding the world. For Darwinism it is the natural survival of the fittest. For Marxism it is the class struggle. For Nihilism it is the inability to know anything. For Postmodernism it is relativism. The center of gravity, the unifying principle, the hermeneutic of the Boomer worldview is the Boomers themselves.

Now this kind of self-referential worldview isn’t really new. Already in the 5th century BC the Greek philosopher Protagoras taught, "Man is the measure of all things." Protagoras would probably have made a good Boomer.

The big difference between the Boomers and Protagoras, however, is that Protagoras didn’t limit his "measure" to his own particular generation; the Boomers do. The Boomers’ version of Protagoras’ axiom seems to be, "The Boomers are the measure of all things."

At this point you might ask, why give any more attention to a generation that is already hopelessly self-obsessed? Why explore a worldview that may be little more than this generation’s prolonged adolescence? Why? Because worldviews have consequences.

Like it or not, we are living, and our children will live with the consequences of the Boomers’ worldview. Os Guinness, writing about the 1960s and its consequences, argues:

The striptease of humanism and the abortion of the counterculture should be accepted as facts germane to any discussion of the future direction of our society.

It’s true. You can’t have an intelligent conversation about society and the culture without taking the Boomers into account. The Boomers’ impact in that area is abundant and obvious. Andrea Sachs writes:

When they were 18 years old, their rites of passage into adulthood — civil rights protest, the war in Vietnam, the counterculture — filled the nation’s front pages. When they finally married and began families — often much later than their own parents— their family issues became the stuff of sitcoms. Throughout their now advancing lives the baby boomers have always stood at the demographic center of American life. Their concerns have been the dominant concerns, their passions the dominant passions.

If the Boomers’ influence on society and the culture has been this great, what impact have the Boomers had on the Church?

To answer that question we are going to have to get specific. Christians believe that every generation of men is sinful. Every generation is self-centered, self-seeking, self-interested, self-absorbed, self-indulgent and self-aggrandizing in its own way. So, what specific characteristics define the Boomers? How have the Boomers affected the Church?
The Six Commandments of the Boomers.

If you were born between 1946 and 1964 and what follows doesn’t apply to you, then consider yourself the exception —the exception that proves the rule. If you’re a Boomer and what follows doesn’t apply to you, then still be willing to see how it does apply to many of the Boomers. If what follows doesn’t apply to you, then don’t take offense at it.

No generation is monolithic. Every generation is shaped by its circumstances and, since circumstances are not uniform, neither are generations. Again, what follows by no means applies to every person born in America between 1946 and 1964. Nor is this list exhaustive. Granted, what follows probably applies more to the leading edge of the Boomer generation than it does to the trailing edge. However, every generation lives by a set of imperatives, commandments, if you will. What are the imperatives for the Boomer generation?

1. Thou Shalt Be Hip.

"It has been said that the major problem of the Baby Boomers is that they refuse to grow up." The prolonged adolescence of the Boomers has taken many forms: worship of youth, obsession with physical fitness, embarrassment at the natural process of aging. Oddly enough, the form most injurious to the Church is also the most trivial: the desire to stay hip, with it, in style and current. But for the Boomers, this isn’t mere trendiness.

All of us have observed how aging men tend to maintain the style of their prime. While the world of fashion moves on, they stay where they are, untouched by current trends. For the Boomers, this tendency is magnified and externalized. Instead of remaining happily frozen in the amber of their glory days, blissfully out of step with the times, the Boomers insist that the times stay frozen around them. A fellow Boomer, Dr. Gene Edward Veith writes:

Notice how aging Boomers still tend to listen to the same music they listened to when they were sixteen. We Baby boomers o not consider that it might be a sign of some infantile clinging to childhood when we do not allow our tastes to change and mature. We tend to think that we are the ones who are not only cool, but contemporary.

And in the Church of the Boomers music is THE issue. Music was the Boomers’ voice. In large part, their music was what defined them as "hip." Suckled at the breast of what began as tinpan alley and quickly became the music industry, the Boomers can’t wean themselves. Their kind of music is hip and that imperative of hip extends even to the Church. Again, Veith observes:

Certainly Baby Boomers often do demand their kind of music in church. This is another of their traits — to be demanding and self-absorbed and intolerant of other styles. The World War II generation never demanded worship styles with Big Band music.

The World War II generation never demanded their style of music in church —they never contemplated such a thing— nor do the Generation Xers. Why? Because they know that the Church doesn’t have to be hip to be relevant and worth their time.

2. Accommodate the Culture to Keep Thyself Relevant.

In their youth, the Boomers saw themselves as a culture-transforming force. But, with the passing years, the lure of the Culture has proven too strong for the Boomers. The 1960s generation that set out to create a Counter-Culture ended up being wooed by the existing culture. By now, that romance has become a happy, indissoluble marriage.

The tables have been turned. The imperative to transform the Culture has become the imperative to accommodate the Culture. Rather than being the transformers of the Culture, the Boomers themselves have been transformed by the Culture.
The Culture promised the Boomers eternal relevance in exchange for their service. And the Boomers were happy to accept these terms. But here is the problem: the Culture may promise relevance, but it can only deliver popularity. There is a big difference between relevance and popularity.

In the Church of the Boomers the same holds true. Relevance is the goal. And since only the Culture can grant that relevance, the Culture determines what is and isn’t relevant. But that Culture regards the Gospel — good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection for sinners— as patently irrelevant.

So the Church of the Boomers comes on bent knee to the Culture, asking, "How can we make this message relevant to you?" The Culture gives a variety of answers, but they all boil down to a single response: "Less Jesus Christ crucified." But it doesn’t stop there. Give the Culture an inch and it will take a mile.

The more the Church of the Boomers follows the Culture’s prescription for relevance, the less Christ crucified is proclaimed. Yes, Christ the moral example, Christ the family counselor, Christ the parenting expert, Christ the financial advisor, Christ the social engineer — these are all there in spades, every Sunday. But Christ crucified ends up being held back, kept in reserve for special occasions. Or He is assumed, always in the background, but seldom explicitly put forward for everyone to see.

To justify this capitulation to the Culture, St. Paul is constantly invoked: I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. The problem is, the immediate context of Paul’s words is ignored:

> Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! and, I do all this for the sake of the gospel.

The Gospel, the message of Jesus’ saving work at the Cross, is precisely what is at stake here. Boomer Churches, like Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, are willing to admit this in theory:

> Contagious churches have learned that they must communicate to their culture without compromising with their culture. They know that if the message of the cross of Christ is every diluted or hidden, then the battle has already been lost.

However, in practice it seems necessary for them to hide, or at least defer, the message of the Cross of Christ:

> If we were convinced that a gospel presentation and invitation every week was the most effective approach for the kinds of people we’re trying to reach, we’d be doing it. For that matter, we’d do it three times a service if that was the way God seemed to be leading! But that is not the case.

Is this God’s leading or the Culture’s?

### 3. Honor Thine Individuality

America has always been a civilization of radical individualism. Alexis de Tocqueville observed:

> Individualism is a novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth. Our fathers were only acquainted with egoism (selfishness). …Selfishness blights the germ of all virtue; individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but in the long run it attacks and destroys all others and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness.

There is no doubt about it; the Boomers are a thoroughly American generation in this respect.

Boomers grew up during the height of the civil rights, women’s rights, reproductive rights and anti-war movements. Perhaps due to these formative events, the Boomers found themselves at odds with almost every institution in society, and at odds with society itself — "the system".

What began as critique of the system has now been swallowed up by mere individualism. Yesterday’s Boomers used to rail against the system as a whole. Today’s Boomers are concerned only with those
particular institutions that affect them personally. Yesterday’s Boomers were concerned with objective rights, liberties and justice. Today’s Boomers are most concerned with their own subjective wants, felt needs, desires, and preferences.

Still, like yesterday’s Boomers, today’s Boomers don’t leave institutions when things don’t go their way (something intolerable to Boomers), they stay and fight, they protest, they sit in. In short, Boomers seek to recreate the institution in their own Boomer image.

The Boomers have brought this imperative of the individual to bear upon the Church. The Church is here to provide whatever the Boomers want or think they need: programs of every conceivable form (concerts, sports, aerobics, weight loss, line dancing, you name it), support groups (sometimes disguised as "Bible studies"), shorter sermons and services (those shorter attention spans, you know), etc. The Church has undertaken more innovations in the last generation than in all the previous generations combined, mostly at the insistence of the Boomers.

All this reworking of the institution of the Church to suit the Boomers is not without theological consequences. When change becomes a virtue in itself, then the message gets subordinated to the quest for novelty. When the programs of the Church are used as a lure, the result is bait-and-switch evangelism. When what is bringing people in on Sunday mornings is the “Jesursize” class on Wednesday nights, the Gospel has already taken a back seat. When the sole emphasis is taken off of Jesus and His work, the emphasis falls on the believer and his work. When the Gospel is missing from even one sermon, human works rush in to fill the void. And when the Church begins to tailor its message the way it has tailored its institutional form, the only result can be compromise.

4. Thou Shalt Forget History.

Every previous generation of Americans has trod a well-worn path through life for subsequent generations to follow. But the Boomers, as they have made their way through life, insist that they are really blazing their own trail.

Every time the Boomers have encountered a new milestone in life —adolescence, marriage, childbirth, parenthood, middle age— they declare themselves the first generation ever to have passed this way. Sure, other generations have done these things before, but they never experienced them the way we Boomers have. In the extreme this amounts to a denial of history. Oddly, the Boomers are not ignorant of history, they simply question its relevance to them.

Now, as the first of the Boomers nears retirement age, they insist on to facing that anew, without reference to the way their parents faced it. National Public Radio recently aired a story about the American Association of Retired Persons. It seems that AARP is trying to repackage its organization to convince Boomers over 50 to join. An AARP spokesperson observed:

The research basically shows that Boomers like choices, they are a generation that thinks they invented everything they’ve ever gone through, every stage of life, including being 50 and older.

AARP is even launching a new "hip, irreverent and media savvy" magazine alongside its "Modern Maturity" magazine with a format and articles geared expressly to Boomers. No surprise, the magazine is called "My Generation." The AARP spokesman says, "What we need to do is to cater to the Boomers."

It seems that this is precisely what many churches are doing as well.

But is it wise for the Church to affirm the Boomers’ arrogant shortsightedness by catering to their disregard of history? What kind of Christianity is produced when the objective facts of history are considered largely irrelevant to faith? What kind of Christianity is produced when the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us is ignored? What kind of Christianity is produced when the most relevant thing to my faith is my subjective experience?
The product is not Christianity at all, but either Pietism or Mysticism. Pietism takes refuge in feelings, Mysticism in experience; both are Christianity turned inward upon the self. It is no wonder that American pop-Christianity is almost evenly split between the two.

5. Thou Shalt Feel Guilty for Selling Out.

The year he died, 1960s counter-culture guru, Abbie Hoffman said of himself and his followers:

_We were young, self-righteous, reckless, hypocritical, brave, silly, headstrong and scared half to death.
And we were right._

Not every Boomer attended Woodstock in 1969, and not everyone there was a Boomer. Many of those involved at Haight-Ashbury during the Summer of Love were born well before 1946. But many Boomers drank deeply of the ideas and ideals of those events and many more like them. Those ideas and ideals, once revolutionary are now mainstream. Gene Veith agrees:

_Today, Baby Boomer values rule in academia, government and the media. What was once counter-culture has become the establishment._

In many ways this gives the Boomers as sense of vindication; in Hoffman's words: "we were right." But for most Boomers that vindication is second-hand. The truth is, there were only 500,000 people at Woodstock, and only several million passed through Haight-Ashbury at its height. Most Boomers were what Don Matzat calls "Baby Boomer Fellow-Travelers." The Sixties were never anything more than a vicarious experience for them.

For most of the Boomers, the responsibilities of adulthood, marriage, parenthood and career meant that many of their youthful ideals had to be abandoned. In other words, some of them simply grew up. And many live with the misplaced guilt of having sold out.

This guilt manifests itself in an interesting way. Boomers maintain the attitude of defiance that went along with the convictions of their youth while abandoning the convictions themselves. They remain revolutionaries at heart, even while living the white-bread, middle class, protestant American dream.

But defiance without conviction is nothing more than rebellion. Defiance with no convictions to guide it is nothing more than license. This leads us to the next imperative.

6. Thou Shalt Question Authority.

Boomers have a serious problem with the 4th commandment, _Honor your father and mother_. The Boomer motto, "don't trust anyone over thirty" was aimed mostly at the Boomer's parents, and then only by extension at all authorities. Rebellion was enshrined to the point of virtue.

In the Church of the Boomers this rebellion against authority manifests itself as a skeptical approach to the Church's doctrinal standards, pastoral authority, and polity.

However, the bigger problem is that in the Church there is an unquestioned authority: the authority of the Bible. The Church of the Boomers rejects this authority in one of two ways; they either deny the authority of the Bible outright, as in liberal Churches, or they relativize the authority of the Bible, as in much of Protestant Evangelicalism. The first kind of rebellion against Scripture's authority is obvious. The second is much more subtle, and therefore more dangerous.

The relativizing of the Scripture allows the Boomers to affirm Scripture's authority in theory while denying it in practice. They can say that they are Bible believing, that the Bible is inerrant and infallible, and even authoritative. The problem isn't in what the Boomers _say_ about the Bible, the problem is in how they _use_ the Bible.
When studying the Bible there is a big difference between asking, "what does it mean?" and asking, "what does it mean to me?" The former seeks objective truth, the latter seeks subjective, relative truth. The former affirms Scripture’s authority, the latter denies it. Bible study in the Church of the Boomers is mostly the latter. If the meaning of the Bible is determined by each individual's private interpretation, then the issue of the Bible’s objective authority is rendered moot.

The Present and Future Challenge for the Church

Theodore Roszak has written "Start out with a gimmick; and you end with a Weltanschaung [worldview]." In the Church of the Boomers a strange reversal of Roszak’s words has occurred. The Boomers started out with a worldview and have ended with little more than gimmicks. Again, Veith:

*The Baby boomers, in their narcissism, prefer a touchy-feely, emotional, entertaining, self-aggrandizing approach to everything from education to the workplace, including church…. Most churches today have been taken over by the Baby Boomer mentality, exhibiting the values of mass-market commercialism, the rejection of the past and hedonistic individualism.*

Os Guinness warns us against "a dangerous vogue for contentless religious experience." Isn't this the true danger of modern pop-Evangelicalism? Isn't this the vogue that the Boomer mentality has brought to all Christian denominations?

How does the Church swim against the tide of 77 million Boomers? Some answer, "It shouldn’t." They argue that the influence of the Boomer mentality has only improved the Church. Others answer, "Ride the wave!" Give the Boomer what they want. After all, we know it's only for this generation." Still others answer, "This too shall pass." But I don’t know if we should take that chance. *USA Today* has recently observed:

*For Baby Boomers, the end has begun. New Census estimates show that their ranks have begun to shrink for the first time as deaths outpace immigration…. In 2031, when the first boomers turn 85, 51 million will remain. By 2046, when the first boomers turn 100, their ranks will drop to 19 million, only one American in 20. At current rates, the last boomer will die about 2070.*

But that probably won’t be the end of it. The passage of the Boomers through American history seems to have permanently altered the American way of thinking. And even after the Boomers themselves are gone, there will still be a lot of "Baby Boomer Fellow-Travelers" out there.

Yet, in the meantime, the aging of the Boomers may present a unique opportunity for the Church. As the Boomers draw closer to the end of their own lives, they will be forced to deal with their own mortality, something they have steadfastly refused to do up until now. Already their own parents are dying; they too will die in turn.

The Church must stress to the Boomers the reality of death, and of its cause, sin. The Church must teach the Boomers that just as their efforts to remain young have failed, so will any efforts to avoid death. The Church must denounce the Boomers’ attempts at spiritual face-lifts, and religious lipo-suction. The Church must say to the Boomers: *No amount of moral self-improvement will avail before God. The only solution to your sin and death is Jesus Christ’s sinless death for you. You cannot forestall your death because you cannot forestall your sin. But Jesus has destroyed both sin and death for you in His death and resurrection for you.*

At the beginning of this essay I wrote about the former East German city of Halle. A dozen or so miles west of the bleak skyline of Halle is the town of Eisleben, where Martin Luther was born and also, by coincidence, where he died. Luther’s worldview was that of Scripture. It was a worldview with the Cross of Jesus Christ as its center, it’s unifying principle, it’s hermeneutic. It is also a worldview with consequences.

Is the Baby Boomer worldview compatible with this Christian worldview? No. How does the Church swim against the tide of 77 million Boomers?
The Church has only two options: she can either drift on that tide like so much flotsam, or she can stand up once again and undertake a Boomer-like revolution. A revolution as radical as that of the 1960s, but one with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Christian worldview at its heart. The aim should not be to transform the Culture, but to restore the Gospel to the Church.

This revolution cannot be achieved with rhetoric, protest or politics. This revolution can only be achieved with means God Himself has given His Church. Throughout her history the pure preaching of the Gospel and the pure use of the Sacraments have held the Church fast against cultural and demographic waves bigger than the Boomers. That Gospel and those Sacraments can do so again. And even if the Church has succumbed to the influence of the Boomer mentality, that Gospel and those Sacraments can restore her again.

Sooner or later there will be another "Baby Boom" with which the Church must contend, and after that, another. Rest assured, She ever shall prevail.

    Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth,
    Her charter of salvation: One Lord, One Faith, One Birth.
    One holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food,
    And to one hope she presses, with every Grace endued.

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Rev. Todd Wilken is host of Issues, Etc.