

1943-1960: Our Moses and Sages
Exodus 32:1-2, 7-20
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Introduction

We now turn to the most studied generation of all time: the Baby Boomers, born between 1943-1960. The dating of this generation’s birth years has been a confusing task. Normally 1946-1964 are assigned. However, I am having us follow authors William Strauss and Neil Howe’s designation of 1943-1960 in their book *Generations*. As we will see in a few weeks, the dates 1946-1964 are the years Strauss & Howe give to the Second Turning, a term which along with three other turnings: First-Fourth, will be important in the second phase of this summer sermon series, “O, Generations!” when we consider how America and the church got to where they are today and where they may be going in the future.

Today, however, we are looking at the Boomers’ Idealist generation, having already examined the G.I.’s “Civic” generation and the Silent’s “Adaptive” generation. Like the G.I.’s and Silents we will discover several previous Idealist generations: Going from most recent to most distant the Idealist generations in America and the church are: the Missionaries Generation of Franklin Roosevelt, the Transcendental Generation of Abraham Lincoln, the Awakener Generation of Benjamin Franklin, and the

Puritan Generation of John Winthrop and Anne Hutchinson. All of these were Idealistic generations who focused on moral and spiritual issues, making them most noticeable for their tendency to preach a vision they did not always live out, making them come under the charge of hypocrisy by their many, many critics. For now, let's turn to a passage from the Book of Exodus, which introduces us to that singular biblical person most often identified with Boomer-Idealist instincts, Moses, whose righteous indignation, typical of Boomers, burns hot!

SCRIPTURE: *Exodus 32:1-2, 7-20*

For my birthday earlier this year I asked for tickets to see my favorite group from the late 1960's and early 1970's "Three Dog Night," playing at the Holland. Not surprisingly, most everyone was a Baby Boomer.

Much to mine and the audience's surprise, it was hard to hear the lyrics as the band started playing. I thought, "This is the Holland, one of the best music halls in the world, the sound will get corrected soon." But no, as the band started their second song sound trouble remained when "the natives grew restless." One voice after another shouted: "Can't Hear You!" Soon, the voices of protest became so numerous the band had to stop, while the Holland sound crew scrambled to fix the problem. Immediately I felt

transported back to the '60's: "Here I am at an event full of Boomers. The experience wouldn't be complete if there weren't a protest!

And why? That evening at the Holland was a microcosm of life in our coming of age years as Boomers. Yes, we've had some incredible music: The Stones, Janis Joplin, the Beach Boys, Jimi Hendrix, Joan Baez; the list is endless. But 3 songs especially come to mind, whose very titles suggest the kind of idealism we Boomers entered our youth and young adulthood with: First, the theme song to "*Camelot*" the 1960 Broadway musical about King Arthur's mythical ideal kingdom; second, the theme song to the 1965 musical "*Man of La Mancha*," about Don Quixote chasing after windmills and "The Impossible Dream;" and, finally, Beatle John Lennon's song "*Imagine*" released in 1971, describing a world in which "all people live in peace." They represent Boomers as a prophet "Joel-like generation, whose "*young see visions, and whose old dream dreams.*"¹ All 3 songs came out when we Boomers were children and young adults.

But along with their idealism, these 3 songs share something else in common: they are reminders of 3 tragedies which Boomers found devastating: first, the assassination of a man whose presidency inspired allusions to Camelot: John F. Kennedy, November 22, 1963; the assassination in April 4, 1968, of a man whose "I Have a Dream" Speech is

considered the greatest of the 20th century, the Quixotic Dr. Martin Luther King; and, finally, the assassination of yet another dreamer Senator Robert F. Kennedy, 2 months later on June 8, 1968. Adding to this long list of tragedies was the assassination of “Imagines” composer John Lennon in 1980. Add to these Vietnam, Watergate, the 1965 riots in Watts, in L.A. and other major American inner city neighborhoods, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the 1970 Kent State and Jackson State shootings, and the riot at the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention, and you get a pretty grim picture of how unsettling the Sixties were for everyone, but especially us Boomers. Before these events, 50’s America was in the words of Simon & Garfunkel “a time of innocence.”

And this may be why the 1960’s were so devastating. Things started pretty well for us Boomers, in the 40’s and 50’s, when the American middle class exploded. My good friend, Dr. Ron Allen of CTS in Indy, calls them “Edenic years”² We got immunized against deadly polio in 1953. We got television in 1954. With TV we got squeaky-clean family role models with shows like *Leave It to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Ozzie and Harriet*. In 1958 we got Hula Hoops and *Davey Crockett* whose paraphernalia sold for more than \$100 million. We got Dave Clark’s *American Bandstand* and

the moon landing in July 1969. Those were the days to “See the U.S.A. in your Chevrolet!” or in a Ford. Camelot lived!

When Tom Brokaw interviewed Hillary Clinton for his book *Boom!*, his follow-up to *The Greatest Generation*, she asked, “Have you cracked the code yet?”³ She was referring to the millions of contradictions, interpretations, romantic notions, myths, and harsh realities of the Sixties. Brokaw turned her question around and asked, “What do you think the code is?” She laughed and answered,

“I’ve thought a lot about it, and it’s always struck me as curious that the Greatest Generation (the G.I.’s) produced the Sixties generation. What were the sort of unmet aspirations, dreams, the frustrations that our parents had that led us to a period of ferment and rebellion and questioning of authority?”⁴

Amazingly, her comments could have just as easily been asked by previous Idealist generations in American history. Riots on American college campuses like Harvard, Cal Berkeley, and Columbia in the Sixties weren’t new. In the late 1800’s Franklin Roosevelt’s Idealistic Missionary generation sparked the greatest wave of campus rebellions since the 1830’s. From the 1810’s to the 1830’s Abe Lincoln’s Transcendental generation caused the worst riots in the history of American universities. At Harvard in 1823, 2/3’s of the senior class were expelled shortly before commencement.

The widespread abuse of drugs didn't start with the Boomers either. In the early 1800's Idealist Transcendentalists were the first to try opium.⁵

Two marks of Idealist generations are their rebellion against authority and their attention to spirituality. This is why the biblical figure most often identified with Boomers is Moses. No text captures as well Boomer-like rebellion and concern for the inner life than Moses standing before Pharoah and demanding "*Let my people go so that they may hold a feast to God in the wilderness.*"⁶ Idealist rebellion and spirituality gave us Awakener Jonathan Edwards preaching "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,*" and the Missionary generation's "Boy Orator and Plains Populist," Nebraska Democratic Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan preaching "Prohibition" and against teaching evolution in schools. "Historians agree that the spiritual fury of the Great Awakening in the early 1700's fed directly, decades later, into the political fury of the American Revolution."⁷ Some historians believe it was the Idealist Transcendentalists whose hard stands regarding slavery, pro-and-con, led to the worst disaster in American history, the Civil War!

What is so hard for next-elder generations to grasp is that, while Boomer spirituality is concerned about social justice, it's done in the confines of radical individualism and not the church. So, when filling in the

blank “God is___ which we have done with G.I.’s and Silents, we have to amend the phrase and speak of “My God is___” and fill in the blank with the word “Truth.” “My God is *Truth.*” Boomers, and our successor, the GenX’ers, rebel against institutional authority of any kind, including the church! In large numbers these generations unwittingly are guilty of the heresy of Gnosticism, the belief that the Spirit need never take any embodied human form, including that of the institutional church. At the same time, Boomers believe their version of the truth **ought to be** the law of the land. This is why G.I.’s found Boomers so quarrelsome over Vietnam and why GenX’ers find Boomers so insufferable in our self-righteousness. Boomers in Washington on both sides of the aisle and in other places act like the Indiana congressman who in the face of incontrovertible evidence that Nixon was guilty of the Watergate cover-up, said in his defense, “I’ve already made up my mind, don’t confuse me with the facts!” Today’s gridlock in Washington over everything from abortion to managing the federal deficit is caused in large part by Boomers vs. Boomers’ refusal to compromise and to see any virtue in their opponents’ opinions.

You see, it’s a mistake to believe all Boomers are alike. On the left are many Vietnam vets and protestors of the First Wave, (ca. 1943-1952) many of whom turned their back on the church; on the right are

fundamentalist conservatives from the Second Wave (ca.1953-1960) whose mega-churches grew like topsy starting in the late 70's, but who gave us an often narrow, sectarian faith. This, you see is the Achilles' Heal of us Boomers, especially of the wholly apocalyptic sort, who in Strauss and Howe's estimation, in the face of a new global crisis could threaten to blow up the world just because of their bull-headedness! The Boomer-like Transcendentalists came very close to leaving America in shambles with their inability to disarm their anger leading to the Civil War.

A Boomer nervously asked the Silent generation Tom Brokaw, following his best-seller *The Greatest Generation*, "What are you going to call this one? (about the Boomers) *The Worst Generation?* Brokaw replies that "More than a few baby boomers told me over the years that *they* represented the greatest generation. After all, they said, they were the largest, the best educated and the wealthiest generation in American history. More importantly, many believed they had stopped a war, changed American politics and liberated the country from the inhibited—and inhibiting—sensibilities of their parents. Brokaw said, "I assured my boomer buddies that I don't think they represent the worst—far from it—but I also teased that I didn't think many of them were as great as they thought they were."⁸

And yet, it was from similar idealist generations like the Boomers that America discovered some of its sagest voices in the face of crises: “Idealists like Benjamin Franklin and his Awakener peers, Lincoln of the Transcendentalists and Franklin Roosevelt of the Missionaries cast a national vision: independence, saving the Union, preserving freedom.”⁹ If we Boomers show uncommonly good sense we may yet be able to help our nation and the world avert a crisis or solve a crisis. This is why, at our best, we Boomers can be like the sages who gifted us with the Bible’s Books of Proverbs, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes. This is why Generational experts Strauss and Howe refer to Boomer-like folks like Franklin, Lincoln, and Roosevelt as “Gray Champions,” as leaders who in their elder hood conduct themselves so magnificently they, like Moses, lead the troubled children of God out of Egypt, through the Wilderness, to the Promised Land.¹⁰

In weeks to come we will come to better appreciate the significance of Boomers’ and others generations’ response to crises in our own times. For now, it’s important to understand the relevance of Boomers’ idealism, however chaotic, divisive, and downright infuriating we may often be. No other generation, among the cycle of four we are examining, grasps with such clarity and sensitivity the importance of ideals in building and renewing American society and Christian hope. Though living with idealists isn’t

always pretty, ideals are still necessary if God's people are to be about more than building highways, engaging in endless litigation on both matters consequential and frivolous, and building budgets and bottom lines. Ideals are necessary for congregations that tend to see their mission as only about preserving buildings, outdated traditions and yesterday's irrelevant ways of doing things. At our best, when not wrapped up in ourselves and narcissistically navel-gazing, we Boomers can help our loved ones, our communities, our nation and, yes, our churches; grasp what the Promised Land might look like. It's because Idealist generations like the Boomers were willing to dream God's impossible dream, which looks for all intents and purposes like Camelot, but which we dare call "the kingdom of God!"

¹ Carl G. Eeman, "The Clash of Ideals," *Generations of Faith*, Washington: Alban Institute, 2002, p. 66.

² Ron Allen and Joey Jeter, "Preaching and Different Generations," *One Gospel, Many Ears*, StL: Chalice Press, 2002, p. 32

³ Tom Brokaw, *Boom!*, NY: Random House, 2008, p. 404

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ William Strauss and Neil Howe's, "The Silent Generation," *Generations: A History of America's Future: 1584-2069*, NY: Quill, 1991, pp. 238 & 199-200.

⁶ Exodus 5:1a

⁷ Strauss & Howe, *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁸ Brokaw, pp. xv-xvi.

⁹ Eeman, p. 58

¹⁰ For an intriguing description of Strauss and Howe's "Gray Champion" cf. their book *The Fourth Turning*, NY: Broadway Books, 1997, pp. 139-144.