

## **Standing between God and Culture: 'Heedership' or Leadership?**

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### **Christianity and Culture**

#### **The Nature of the Controversy**

The issue of culture and its relationship to Christianity, though not a new issue, is once again making its presence felt in the Church today. The call to cultural relevance and to revolution in worship seems to pervade our society. Cultural components and cultural relevance are proclaimed as the outreach tool by which church growth is guaranteed. In one form or another issues inherent to cultural awareness and to cultural relevance are being faced by churches throughout our society. Those churches resisting the embrace are feeling increased pressures to open welcoming arms.

The banner waving across the lawn of the church on Main Street reads: "Tired of People Telling You What to Think and Do? Come Worship with Us." Apparently this Main Street church offers a worship service that will incorporate the views and activities of the average citizen, a worship service that reflects our current culture. Concerning the worship of the Almighty God, this church advertises and apparently offers a service with no plan to change the thoughts or acts of the average citizen in relationship to God. The banner appears to advertise worship that conforms to and that reflects current culture, not worship that transforms and reforms current culture. A gospel of reflection, not reformation.

The brochure delivered by the U.S. Postal Service and now sitting on my desk advertises a seminar on worship entitled: "Worship that Attracts and Holds the Unchurched: A Fresh Look at Corporate Worship and How to Make it a Relevant and Reverent Tool to Reach the Unchurched in Today's Culture." The seminar being advertised is designed to show "the impact of the modern cultural milieu and how it impacts worship." The seminar promises to make available to you and your church "the single most important strategy to make a paradigm shift in worship without losing your congregation." Attend this seminar and learn how to incorporate current culture into your worship and thereby make it "relevant" to the unchurched in your community. While being taught how to make your worship culturally relevant and thereby attractive to the unchurched, the seminar promises to teach you how to hold on to your "churched" congregation, who apparently presently attend worship even though it is not culturally-oriented. A gospel of reflection, not reformation.

We live in a day when worship has become democratized<sup>1</sup> or popularized. The focus of worship is shifting (has shifted?) from God to mankind. We live in a day of consumer-driven worship. The aim is no longer (at least primarily) to please God but to attract the unchurched. The bottom line is not so much obedience to God's—bringing man into conformity with God; that is, doctrinal, but the attraction of the unchurched; that is, practical or evangelistic. The aim is to increase church attendance by culturally orienting worship to the unchurched; that is, by instituting a "paradigm shift" in worship to make it attractive by making it culturally relevant. Perhaps Barna has said it all with the title of his book on church growth: "*Marketing the Church.*"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Democratize" is a verbal form of the noun "democracy" which is derived from a compound Greek word: *demos* (the people) + *kratein* (to rule) with the meaning "people rule" or in this context "the people having their way."

<sup>2</sup>George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988).

The focus of worship is on mankind, making worship relevant and acceptable to the unchurched—selling the church to the unchurched. A gospel of reflection, not reformation.

Although there is a considerable amount of focus on topics such as cultural relevance and church growth involved in this shift in worship paradigms, there are other, perhaps more important, aspects called into question by this shift to consumer-driven worship of which little is heard. For example, one must ask whether the purpose of the church, as instituted and described in the New Testament, when gathered together for worship is primarily for evangelism (focused on the unchurched) or for edification (focused on the church).

Another question that must be answered concerning the breadth and degree to which culture is allowed to influence worship is whether the Gospel is to *reflect* culture or is to *reform* culture? If culture, as J. Robertson McQuilkin observes, is “all human language, behavior, morals, values, and ways of doing things in any particular group of people,”<sup>3</sup> then the question must be asked whether it is acceptable for the church to permit and to pursue the “language, behavior, morals, values, and ways of doing things” by the unregenerate to determine how the church worships their God. Are those who have not become part of God’s faith-family to set the guidelines for worshipping the Father? Is the Gospel to *reflect* the culture in which we minister or is the Gospel to *reform* the culture in which we minister? Do we allow our culture to mold our worship and God’s gospel? Or do we seek to mold our culture and our worship to God’s gospel?

The aim of this article is to investigate a single aspect of the present resurgence of cultural relevance and local church worship, that being the impact of consumer-driven worship at the pastoral level, as the shepherd of the flock and the undershepherd to the Great Shepherd. What is incumbent on the pastor as he stands

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<sup>3</sup>J. Robertson McQuilkin, “Identifying the Audience God Intended,” in *Rightly Divided: Readings in Biblical Hermeneutics*, edited by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996) 259.

between God and culture in ministering to the flock of God? Is the ministry of the pastor in leading the local church in worship to be characterized by heedership (democratized, consumer-driven) or by leadership (theocratized, God-driven)? In order to consider the question at hand, this investigation will focus on the ministries of Moses and Aaron in Exodus 24-32 as examples not only of the difference, but also of the results of heedership and leadership of God's flock at the "pastoral" level.

### The Scope of the Controversy

Moses in his "biography" records an incident in his early adulthood when he sought to deliver his people by slaying an Egyptian overseer (Exodus 2:11-15). Moses apparently recognized at this point, though certainly not fully, that his *function* in ministry was one of deliverance. He apparently realized *what* God intended for him to do; he acted as a deliverer. However, he struggled with the proper *philosophy* of ministry, that is, *how* he was to accomplish what God intended for him to do. He struggled with how he was to deliver God's enslaved people from Egypt. And in this instance, he chose the wrong philosophy of ministry to practice. Before we can adequately identify the pastor's role as he stands between God and culture, it is necessary to gain a proper realization of the scope of the issue involved. We must be aware not only of the *what* of ministry (function) but also of the *how* of ministry (philosophy). We must further recognize that one's choice of ministry philosophy involves both immediate and ultimate issues.

**Immediate Issue: Ministry Philosophy.** For most who stand in a role of leadership over God's people there is no question about the *function* of ministry. As pastors or missionaries or school administrators we are to function as a shepherd of God's people. The Bible is clear beyond confusion: "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you" (1 Pet. 5:2). As ministers we are to

shepherd; that is, we are to provide total care for God's flock. There does not seem to be a choice in the function or the *what* of ministry—God's Word is clear.

For all who would shepherd God's people there is a question about the *philosophy* of ministry. As pastors or missionaries or school administrators we must choose *how* we will function as shepherds of God's people. There is a choice to be made in what philosophy of ministry we will follow.

The Bible has much to say about a diversity of philosophies of ministry. For example, when Ezekiel addressed the “shepherds” of Israel in chapter 34 he mentioned two divergent philosophies of ministry. He stated in verse 2, “Woe to the shepherds . . . who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?” There is a distinct difference in philosophies that result in “eating” the flock or “feeding” the flock. There is a choice to be made in *how* the function of ministry is to be carried out. Although there is a choice to be made by the shepherds, only one choice is acceptable to the Great Shepherd (v. 10); those who would minister to the flock must feed the flock. Likewise, Christ pointed out in John 10 the divergence of ministry philosophies through the illustration of the shepherd and the hireling. He stated in verses 12-13, “He who is a hireling, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, beholds the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep, and flees, and the wolf snatches them, and scatters them. *He flees* because he is a hireling, and is not concerned about the sheep.” There is a difference between a philosophy of ministry characterized by the hireling and by the true shepherd. However, perhaps even more significantly, the difference in ministry philosophies affects the flock in radically diverse ways. One ministry philosophy provides the flock with protection, the other sacrifices the flock. There is a choice to be made between a philosophy of ministry characterized by the hireling and by the true shepherd.

There is a choice to be made in the philosophy one will follow in ministry—*how* to minister. Will ministry be

characterized by heedership or leadership? Will I listen to God and lead his people? Or will I listen to God's people and follow them? However, the choice of ministry philosophies is not the only or the ultimate issue to be faced by the pastor as he stands between God and culture.

**Ultimate Issue: Religious Philosophy.** The issue of ministry philosophy and style actually reflects a larger issue; it reflects a conflict between contrasting religious philosophies. In a real sense Bible history is a history of conflicting religious philosophies, the conflict between *proclaimed* religion and *practiced* religion. Proclaimed religion is *theocratic-based*: it originates with God. Mosaic religion in the Pentateuch and the teachings of Christ in the Gospels are examples of "Proclaimed Religion"—God-derived and God-dictated religion. Theocratic-based religion rests on "Thus saith the LORD." On the other hand, practiced religion is *democratic-based*: it originates with mankind. The corrective messages of the Prophets in the Old Testament and the Epistles in the New Testament reflect the struggle between "Proclaimed" and "Practiced Religion." Both the Prophets and the writers of the Epistles call mankind back to "Proclaimed Religion"—to God-derived and God-dictated worship. Practiced religion is derived and dictated by mankind—by humanity's sin-affected heart and mind. Democratic-based religion rests on "Thus thinketh man."

Mankind's struggle between proclaimed and practiced religion goes back to the opening chapters of Genesis and has continued throughout history. It is clearly seen in the account of the Fall in Genesis 3 with the reversal of Adam and Eve's God-given roles. Mankind's fall into sin occurred when Eve practiced leadership and Adam practiced heedership. This struggle occurred again in Genesis 4 with the sacrifices of the sons of Adam and Eve. On one hand, Abel offered a sacrifice in accordance to God's dictates, in conformity to proclaimed religion. On the other hand, Cain offered a sacrifice in accordance with his own decision, in

conformity to practiced religion. The conflict between proclaimed and practiced religion is as old as the beginnings of mankind.

The assault of practiced religion upon proclaimed religion has continued through the ages to the present day and shows no signs of coming to an end. However, in the day and age in which we live it is both *more blatant and more subtle*. We see its *blatantness* in the “Consumer-driven Church Movement”—in the mentality characterized by finding out what people want in religion and worship and then giving it to them. If they want all singing and/or a faster beat, then give them all singing and/or a faster beat. If they want less formality with folding chairs, casual dress, and inspiring talks, then get rid of the pews, dress in jeans, get rid of the pulpit, sit on a stool, and give them inspiring talks, dramas, and readings but not convicting sermons. We see its *subtleness* in the discussion over contextualization and cultural relevance, as well as in the arguments that reflect the sentiment that “*We need to reach our culture by reflecting our culture.*” And the truth is that we do need to reach our society. And we will not be able to reach our society by isolating ourselves from it. However, the ability of God's people to reach their society has never depended on their abandonment of Scriptural principles of holiness in character and conduct or of separation from the world. It is theologically possible to do both: to live in this world while not being of this world and to be savory salt while not staying in the salt shaker.

One's philosophy of ministry and philosophy of religion go hand-in-hand. They are not only complementary but are inherent in one another. To choose one is to choose the other. While focusing on one's philosophy of ministry, one's philosophy of religion cannot be taken for granted or be forgotten. The choice of one inherently and inseparably involves the choice of the other. Therefore, the leader of God's people must be aware that in choosing and practicing a philosophy of ministry he is choosing a philosophy of religion. Although one's philosophy of ministry claims immediate focus and attention, as the minister stands

between God and culture, he must consider the ultimate focus of his decision.

### **Harmony of Commissions: Exodus 3-4**

Before investigating the divergent ministry philosophies of Moses and Aaron, it is significant that we realize they shared a unity of commissions. In Exodus 3-4 the Bible recounts the commission of Moses and Aaron to deliver God's people from Egypt and to lead them into the Promised Land.

#### **Different Positions of Responsibility**

It is evident to anyone who is familiar with the stories of the Exodus and Wilderness experiences of Israel as recorded in the Pentateuch that Moses and Aaron held two distinct positions of responsibility. In the administration of God's plan and agenda Moses and Aaron were not equals. Their positions were distinct and different. Moses was the superior and Aaron was the assistant. However, we must not yield to the temptation to assume that differing positions reflect differing commissions.

#### **Same Commission**

Although Moses and Aaron occupied different positions in God's program of delivering and leading Israel, they shared the same commission. An examination of their commission reveals three characteristics.

**Personal Commission.** Although called to be the leader and the assistant in God's plan to deliver Egypt from bondage and to lead them into the Promised Land, Moses and Aaron both received personal commissions. Both were commissioned directly from God, individually and personally.



*Moses' Commission:* The account of Moses' commission is recorded in Exodus 3:2-10. In the account of Moses' commission at the burning bush, Moses was directly encountered and commissioned by God. There were no intermediaries or mediators between God and Moses. The commission is characterized by direct personal contact. According to Exodus 3:2 "the angel of the LORD," (that is, Jesus Christ the second member of the trinity), was present in the fire that day. He personally called Moses by name. The personal nature of Moses' commission is also evident in the holiness of the occasion. It was the presence of the Lord that made the occasion and the location holy (vv. 5-6). The Lord personally commissioned Moses that day. The personal nature of Moses' commission lives forever in biblical memory by God's revelation of Himself that day as Yahweh, the covenant name of God (vv. 13-14). God revealed Himself to Moses with the name that not only reflects God's immanence but also His relationship with His people.

*Aaron's Commission:* The personal nature of Aaron's commission is evident both indirectly and directly. The personal nature of Aaron's commission is evident indirectly in Moses' commission at the burning bush. In Exodus 4:10-13 Moses reflects on his unworthiness to be the instrument of God. His demurral focuses on his mouth: "I have never been eloquent . . . I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." The mouth is the instrument of the prophet by which he proclaims the message he has received from God. In verse 14 God responded to Moses' demurral for the last time. God's final answer to Moses' hesitation was Aaron (v. 14a). The term "behold" (v. 14b, הִנֵּה) is a narrative device signaling simultaneous action. That is, while God was personally commissioning Moses, He was personally supplying Moses' self-proclaimed shortcoming. God's supply was Aaron.

The personal nature of Aaron's commission is directly evident in Exodus 4:27a: "The Lord said to Aaron, 'Go to meet Moses in the wilderness.'" The account of Aaron's commission is not as extensive as Moses' not only because Moses was the

superior and Aaron the assistant but also because Aaron's commission complemented Moses'. Though shorter, the account is just as direct and personal. God spoke to Aaron personally without a mediating angel. God commissioned Aaron personally.

**Pointed Commission.** Both Moses and Aaron received full commissions as is evidenced by four characteristics. First, both commissions include distinct "commission" terminology. The prophetic commissions of the Old Testament always involve "sending" and "going." Moses' commission continually reflects being "sent" as found in Exodus 3:10, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 4:28. Aaron is commissioned by God to "Go to meet Moses" (4:27a).

Second, both are given a destination—told where to go. Commissioning involves a destination and recipients. Moses is directly commissioned by God to go to Pharaoh (Exod. 3:10) and to the children of Israel (Exod. 2:13). Aaron is directly commissioned by God to go meet Moses (Exod. 4:27).

Third, both are given a task to fulfill—told what to do. Commissioning involves a job to do, an activity to undertake. While Moses is directly commissioned by God concerning a task, Aaron is indirectly commissioned in this aspect through Moses. They are commissioned to speak both to Israel, informing them, and to Pharaoh, confronting him.

Fourth, both are given a message to deliver—told what to say. Commissioning involves a message to deliver. Moses was commissioned to speak to Israel for God saying, "I AM has sent me!" and to speak to Pharaoh saying, "Let my people go!"

**Purposeful Commission.** Commission is never an end in itself; God had a purpose and plan for both Moses and Aaron. God made it perfectly clear what position each would fill in His agenda and plans. They both were go-betweens, mediators, intermediaries. They were going to be *channels* by which God delivered and led his people.

The commission to Moses and Aaron contains the first use of the term commonly translated “prophet” (*nabi*, נָבִי) in the Old Testament. A prophet was basically a go-between, a mediator from God to mankind. A prophet basically functioned in getting a message from God and giving that message to mankind. He received a message from someone else (usually a superior) and delivered that message to the audience to whom he was sent. A prophet does not choose the message. Or the recipients. Or the timing. Or the location.

According to God's commission, Moses would receive the message from God and he would deliver it to Aaron. Aaron would take the message and deliver it to Israel. Exodus 7:1, “And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet.” God chose the message and the recipients and the timing and the destination.

There is no doubt that there was sacrifice involved for Moses and Aaron. There is no doubt that there was challenge involved. There is no doubt that there was danger involved and courage needed. There is no doubt that this commission took them out of their comfort zone. However, at the same time, there was also no doubt of God's promise, “And you are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth; *and I, even I, will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will teach you what you are to say*” (Exodus 4:15).

Moses and Aaron, although fulfilling differing positions in God's plan, shared the same commission. Aaron's commission completed and supplemented Moses' commission. Their commissions were personal and pointed and purposeful. Even though their positions differed, their commissions did not. According to God's directions they were to go to God's people and tell them, “Thus saith the Lord.” And they were to go to those who were not God's people and tell them, “Thus saith the Lord.”

### Diversity of Practices

Even though Moses and Aaron shared a harmony of commissions, Exodus chapters 24-31 bear witness to a diversity in their practice. Although there was a unity of ministry function, Moses and Aaron differed drastically in their ministry philosophy. Before noting the diversity of practice it is beneficial to review two important facts. First, chronology. Even though chapters 24 and 32<sup>4</sup> are separated by seven other chapters they chronologically overlap. Exodus 32:1-14 actually occurred at the same time as the events recorded in chapter 24. Chapters 25-31 form a legal section interrupting the historical narrative flow of the book. The Golden Calf incident is an interruption coming between the Tabernacle *instructions* of chapters 25-31 and the Tabernacle's *construction* of chapters 35-40. Second, location. The events of these chapters take place at Mt. Sinai. The events are not separated by any significant distance. The events from Moses' ministry recorded in chapter 24 occur *in the top of the mountain with God*. The events from Aaron's ministry recorded in chapter 32 occur *at the foot of the mountain with Israel*. A third significant detail, though not part of the background, is the rhetorical structure of the two events. The author under inspiration has arranged both accounts in similar formats: first an *initiating speech* starts the action; then the *reaction of the addressee* to the speech is recorded; the action is then picked up by a *heightening speech*; finally the *result of the action* is recorded. The author's use of parallel structures in communicating these events aids our comparison of Moses' and Aaron's ministry philosophies in action.

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<sup>4</sup>See the appendix for an outline of these chapters in relation to the whole book.

## Moses in the Mountain with God: Exodus 24

**Initiating Speech, vv. 1-2.** The speech that initiates the action in the Moses account of chapter 24 is from God to Moses. God's speech basically contains two elements. First, God uses imperatives to command Moses, "Come up . . . and worship!" Then God gives Moses instructions. Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders are to ascend the mountain but only as far as the slope. The general populace of Israel is to remain at the foot of the mountain. And Moses alone is to ascend to the top of the mountain.

**Reaction of the Addressee, vv. 3-11.** A survey of Moses' reaction to God's initiating speech reveals that it is characteristically positive. First, Moses completes his previous commitment (24: 3-8). Moses ratifies the Covenant (chapters 20-23) with Israel in a covenant ceremony. Then Moses obeys God's new instructions and climbs the mountain (24:9-11). New instructions did not negate old responsibilities. Moses did not set aside what he had been told to do in order to obey what might be considered current, more exciting instructions.

**Heightening Speech, vv. 12-18.** The action of Exodus 24 is picked up at this point by a second speech by God (Exod. 24:12). At this point God speaks to Moses a second time calling for further obedience: "Come up . . . into the mountain." God's second speech is heightened by detailing the *purpose*: to provide a symbol of covenant relations—"that I might give you tablets of stone."

As in the first instance, Moses obeyed God a second time (24:13-18). Moses left *instructions for the care of the people*, placing Aaron and Hur in charge. The call for current obedience did not eliminate his responsibility to fulfill past instructions. He had to obey God but he also had to care for the people. Having

issued instructions for the care of the people, Moses climbed the mountain as commanded by God.

**Result, Exodus 24-31.** The Moses episode in chapter 24 ends with God's provision for further fellowship and worship, not for Moses personally but for Israel collectively. The result of this episode is that Moses received instructions for building the Tabernacle (25:8). God made provision for continued fellowship and worship on a daily, intimate basis by means of the Tabernacle.

### **Aaron at the Mountain with Israel: Exodus 32**

**Initiating Speech, v. 1.** Unlike the initiating speech in the Moses episode of Exodus 24, the Aaron episode of Exodus 32 begins with an initiating speech by Israel to Aaron. While Moses is in the mountain with God, the people of Israel assemble before Aaron and say, "Make us gods!"

Both initiating speeches are similar in that each speaker used imperatives. However, it is necessary to realize when there is an expression of the will (volition) in Hebrew that *social distance* and/or *social context* determine the strength of the imperative.<sup>5</sup> The relationship of the speaker to the recipient and the occasion must be considered in determining the strength of the volitional idea. When a superior uses an imperative to an inferior, as God did with Moses (24:1-2), it carries the strength of a command. When an inferior uses an imperative to a superior, as Israel did with Aaron (32:1), it carries the strength of a request or suggestion. In light of not only Aaron's commission to relay God's directive through Moses to Israel but also the grammatical

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<sup>5</sup>See the discussion of "Volitional Uses of the Non-Perfective" in Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 509.

significance of the form and situation, Aaron *should have* taken this as nothing more than a request or suggestion.

**Reaction of the Addressee, vv. 2-8.** A survey of Aaron's reaction to Israel's initiating speech reveals that it is characteristically negative. Aaron's negative reaction is apparent on two counts. First, he aborts his previous commitment (32:2). He abandons his commission of Exodus 2-3 to listen to God through Moses and then to speak to the people ("Thus saith the Lord"). Second, he abandons his instructions of Exodus 24:14. Before Moses ascended the mountain in obedience to God, he had instructed Aaron to care for the people until he returned.

Aaron's disobedience to both God's and Moses' directives reached its apex in the making of a molten calf (32:2-8). While *Moses practiced leadership* by listening to God and then speaking to the people, thus fulfilling his commission (Exodus 3 - 4); *Aaron practiced heedership*. Aaron listened to the people and treated what should have been taken as a request as a command. What Aaron should have taken as a bad suggestion was treated as a command to be obeyed and followed. Aaron never sought anyone else's counsel. Aaron never went to God for instructions. He did not postpone his response in order to confer either with Hur, who had also been left with Aaron to care for the people, or with Moses.

It is also significant to recognize how both Moses and Aaron responded to the commandments so recently delivered from God. To appreciate the contrast in the actions of these two shepherds it must be remembered that the giving of the Ten Commandments immediately preceded the events of chapters 24 and 32. The giving of the Ten Commandments was fresh in their ears when they put their divergent ministry philosophies into action. Moses obeyed the first commandment, climbing the mountain to worship God (24:9-11). At virtually the same time, Aaron broke the second commandment and made an idol. Aaron *initiated* Israel to *idolatry*. Significantly, the request of the

people, which Aaron heeded involved, the introduction of *contemporary cultural practices into Israel's worship*. The calf figure which the people requested was used both in Egypt and in Canaan as a symbol of power, strength, and leadership.<sup>6</sup> As such in the cultures of the ANE it was either deified or used in worship as a symbol of deity. After Aaron allowed the introduction of contemporary cultural practices into Israel's worship, the people of God took this "paradigm shift" in worship a step further. The text indicates that in their worship they also followed *contemporary cultural practices* (i.e., Canaanite) and incorporated sexual conduct (orgies, cf. 32:6) into their worship.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>See Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia, New York, and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 5751 / 1991) 203, "Throughout the Near East the bull was a symbol of lordship, leadership, strength, vital energy, and fertility. As such it was either deified and worshiped or employed in representation of divinity. . . . Aaron seems to have followed contemporary artistic convention." Also see John I. Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus* (Waco: Word Books, 1987) 420, "The widespread presence of bull images in ANE worship has been thoroughly confirmed by Eissfeldt . . ." and p. 421 "The probability that the calf was a symbol of divinity widely used among Israel's neighbors of course makes Israel's idolatry even worse."

<sup>7</sup>See Leslie C. Allen, "qjx," *NIDOTTE* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997) 3: 797, "In Exod 32:6 the vb. is used in connection with the worship of the golden calf . . . more likely it refers to a sexual orgy." See also Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia, New York, and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 5751 / 1991) 204, Israel "was taken over and has plunged into pagan orgiastic rites." Also J. Philip Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus, New Century Bible*, (Greenwood, S.C.: The Attic Press, Inc., 1971) 305, "this suggests a fertility ceremony, probably with obscene rites. In Gen. 26:8; 39:14, 17 the verb *sahak* (piel) has a sexual connotation." Also see John I. Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus* (Waco: Word Books, 1987) 422, "The celebration of an obligating relationship in Exod 24 becomes in Exod 32 an orgy of the desertion of responsibility."



In contemporary terms they made their worship *culturally relevant*.

In reaction to the initiating speech of Israel, Aaron's reactions were all and only negative. He disobeyed his instructions from both God and Moses. He opened the door for idolatry to enter Israel's worship by heeding the people and by introducing contemporary cultural practices into their worship.

**Heightening Speech, vv. 9-14.** As in the Moses episode of chapter 24, the heightening speech of the Aaron episode in chapter 32 is from God (32:9-10). However, there are two significant differences in this instance. First, unlike God's speech to Moses in chapter 24 which contained a call to further obedience and the provision for God's personal presence to be enjoyed by Israel, this heightening speech is characterized by condemnation. The omniscient God was fully aware of what was occurring at the foot of the mountain with Aaron and Israel and addressed Moses on the top of the mountain. He informed Moses, "I have seen this people and they are an obstinate people." The term "obstinate" (קשה-ערה ; literally "hard necked") always carries a negative connotation speaking of unrighteousness and rebelliousness.<sup>8</sup> After making the observation concerning Israel's nature, God orders Moses to "leave me alone" (v. 10a). The purpose for this directive to Moses is that God might be angry and "destroy them" (v. 10b, c). "Israel's rebellion and construction of a golden calf fixed the Lord's understanding of this people, for they were a rebellious, stiff-necked people and justly deserved destruction--they had broken the covenant even

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<sup>8</sup>See A.S. van der Woude, "קשה to be hard," *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, translated by Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997) 1176, "If the obj. *orep* always refers to the reflexive process of people's rebellion and disobedience to God's word."

before the covenantal documents had been delivered to them (32:9)."<sup>9</sup>

Second, this heightening speech also contains a response. After hearing God's observation and determination, Moses made intercession on behalf of Israel (32:11-14).<sup>10</sup> This intercession focused almost entirely on God. Moses began with a rhetorical question (v. 11): "Why will you be angry against your people?"—Why are *You* doing this? He then appealed to public testimony (v. 12), "What will Egypt say about you?"—If you do this what will the unsaved think about *You*? Finally he appealed to the Patriarchal promises of God (v. 13), "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel to whom you swore . . ."—Remember *Your* promises! The result of this first intercession by Moses was that God relented of His plans (v. 14).

**Result, vv. 15-35.** While the result of the Moses episode in Exodus 24 was provision for further fellowship and worship, this episode resulted in confrontation over sin. If any fellowship and worship had existed between God and His people, it was all lost as a result of Aaron's ministry.

The result of the Aaron episode in Exodus 32 is basically related from the perspective of Moses. The result is communicated in four parts. First, Moses' reaction to Israel's sin is related in verses 15-20. Once Moses becomes privy to first-hand knowledge of Israel's sin, his reaction becomes much more God-like. When God first told Moses of Israel's sin, Scripture records that God (#1) *saw* what had been done (v. 9b); then (#2) became *angry* (v. 10a); then (#3) proposed *ending the covenant relationship* by destroying Israel (v. 10b). When Moses descended the mountain and experienced Israel's sin first-hand,

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<sup>9</sup>Eugene Carpenter, "Exodus: Theology of," *NIDOTTE* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997) 4: 614.

<sup>10</sup>The true significance of this intercession can only be determined when it is compared to Moses' second intercession in Exodus 32:30-35.

Scripture records that Moses (#1) *saw* what Israel was doing (v. 19b); then (#2) became *angry* (v. 19c); then (#3) symbolically *ended the covenant relationship* by breaking the covenant documents (v. 19d). Moses' reaction to Israel's sin directly paralleled God's reaction.

Second, Moses confronted Aaron (32:21-25). When he was confronted with Israel's sin, Aaron *selfishly offered excuses*. He offered three justifications for his actions: First, he claimed that the people were inherently evil (32:22). Second, he claimed that the people instigated the incident (32:23). Finally, he claimed that the calf miraculously leaped out of the fire (32:24, perhaps claiming that God *must* be in it).

By contrast, when Moses was confronted with Israel's sin, he *sacrificially interceded with God*. Moses' second intercession with God was distinctly different from his first. This second intercession focused almost entirely on Israel's sinfulness (32:30-32). In this intercession Moses emphatically confessed sin and pled for God's forgiveness (v. 31). Then Moses offered himself in substitution for Israel (v. 32). It is noteworthy that once Moses personally saw the nature and extent of Israel's sin, his intercession was heightened and more God-like.

Third, Moses called for a reaction of the faithful (32:26-29). At this point the "sons of Levi" responded and 3,000 of the guilty were killed.

Fourth, God judged Israel's sin (32:33-35). Concerning Moses' part in the Aaron episode, God found Moses exempt from judgment. The people's sin under the ministry of Aaron did not affect Moses' leadership. God instructed Moses, "Go now, lead the people where I told you" (v. 34). Concerning Israel's part, Israel was punished for their sin, "the Lord *smote the people because of what they did* with the calf which Aaron had made" (v. 35). Concerning Aaron's part in this episode, Aaron was worthy of blame: "the Lord smote the people because of what they did with the calf *which Aaron had made*" (v. 35).

**Evaluations of the Aaron Episode.** The text incorporates several evaluations of what Israel did and experienced under Aaron's ministry of heedership in Exodus 32. The first evaluation is God's reaction as recorded in verse 7. God told Moses, "Your people have become corrupt." There are two indications of God's evaluation in this short quotation. First, God switches from a first person pronoun ("my") to a second person pronoun ("your") in describing Israel. This switch goes beyond the mere significance of God calling Israel Moses' people. The switch in terminology also signals a dropping of covenant terminology in God's reference to Israel. Israel is no longer considered by God as "my" people. Secondly, God describes Israel as "corrupt." The noun "corrupt" (רָשָׁע) is used of divine judgment.<sup>11</sup> For example, consider the occurrences in Genesis 6:11-12, "Now the earth was *corrupt* in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked on the earth, and behold, it was *corrupt*; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth." At this point in Genesis because of the corrupt conduct of mankind, God sent judgment in the form of a world devastating flood.

The second evaluation is Joshua's reaction as recorded in verse 17. As Joshua accompanied Moses to the assembly of Israel at the foot of the mountain, Joshua heard "the sound of the people as they shouted," which he interpreted in his comment to Moses as "the sound of war is in the camp." In this context Joshua functioned as an uninvolved, unprejudiced observer. Moses had already been told by God that there was trouble in the camp. Joshua reacted to the sound in the camp with great concern. While Israel instituted their contemporary cultural practices into worship, Joshua interpreted the sound as confusion, disturbance, and conflict, not as worship or praise.

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<sup>11</sup>See Cornelius Van Dam, "רָשָׁע," *NIDOTTE* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997) 4:92, "The thorough devastation that *sh't* denotes makes it apt vocabulary for pronouncements and descriptions of divine judgment."

The third evaluation is Moses' reaction recorded in verse 25. After listening to Aaron's excuses (vv. 21-24), Moses saw that "the people are out of control because Aaron let them out of control" (v. 25). The root פָּרַע ("out of control") which occurs in both the verbal and nominal forms in this verse basically has the meaning of to let go or to let loose. In this context it has the idea of lacking restraints.<sup>12</sup> Aaron had allowed the people to become unrestrained in their "worship" so that they were out of control. The negative connotation in this context is borne out in the use of the term in Proverbs 29:18, "Where there is no vision, the people are *unrestrained*." Where God's Word is not present or is not obeyed, people become "out of control."

The fourth evaluation is the narrator's reaction as recorded in verses 6 and 35. The evaluation of the inspired author is twofold: (#1) He described the worship negatively in verse 6 noting that "they rose to *play*" (KJV). As has been previously pointed out, the word refers to pagan ritualistic orgies. The narrative characterizes the "worship" under Aaron's ministry as being like that of the pagan Canaanites. (#2) He also points to the direct cause of Israel's sin in verse 35. He recorded that the manufacture of the molten golden calf was Aaron's responsibility ("which Aaron had made"). The people may have called for the manufacture of "gods" but Aaron was under no obligation to heed their request. Aaron was in a position and under a commission to lead the people; when he chose to heed the people, the result was sin—broken fellowship and false worship—and judgment.

A final indication of how the episodes of chapters 24 and 32 are to be understood is evident in Israel's reaction to the

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<sup>12</sup>See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1972) 828. See also Richard A. Taylor, "פָּרַע," *NIDOTTE* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997) 3:690, "The word suggests the lifting of prior social restraint from people, as when Aaron allowed the Israelites to run wild in the absence of Moses." See also Victor P. Hamilton, "פָּרַע" *TWOT*, 2:736.

individual ministries of Moses and Aaron. In the episode centering on Moses in chapter 24, scripture recounts that Israel responded to Moses' ministry of leadership with unified obedience. Notice Exodus 24:3 and 7. Verse 3, "The people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the words which Yahweh has spoken we will do!'" Verse 7, "They said, 'All which Yahweh has spoken we will do, and we will obey!'" However, in response to Aaron's ministry characterized by heedership, the people responded with disobedience and idolatry as is evidenced by Exodus 32: 4 and 8. Verse 4, "These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt." Verse 8, "These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt."

### Conclusion

As shepherds of God's flock the *function* of ministry is clear: we must provide the flock with full care (1 Pet. 5:2). However, the question that each shepherd must answer and certainly will answer concerns the *philosophy* that will characterize his ministry—*how* will he minister? As each minister stands between God and culture, two basic options present themselves. The choice is between a philosophy and ministry characterized by *heeding* or by *leading*. Between a gospel that reflects culture and a gospel that reforms culture.

The call of culture is a call to democratized worship—to heeding the people; a call to "practical" religion that responds and conforms to the thoughts and decisions of mankind. The call of God's Word is a call to theocratized worship—to leading the people: a call to "proclaimed" religion that responds and conforms to the thoughts and decisions of God as revealed in His Word.

The choice between the two options, it would appear, should not be difficult to make. If the popular proverb is true that experience is the best teacher, then the lessons to be learned concerning the choice between heedership and leadership would

best be learned from the experiences of someone else. Both Moses and Aaron stood between God and culture with the same, shared commission. Their *function* was clear. They were to deliver and lead God's people by listening to God and then relaying what they had been told to the people. However, when they had the opportunity to exercise their function, each chose a different philosophy of action. Moses chose leadership—listen to God and lead the people. Aaron chose heedership—listen to the people and follow their bidding. Moses' practice of leadership resulted in God's provision for more intimate fellowship and worship (the Tabernacle). Aaron's practice of heedership resulted in broken fellowship and pagan worship which brought God's just and certain judgment. Experience may have taught a lasting lesson, but the tuition it charged was high indeed. If we must learn from experience, it is better to learn from someone else's experience. Better to follow Moses' example and avoid Aaron's choice.

We must give due care as we stand between culture and God's people to the choices we make. The popular call to a "paradigm" shift in worship may have unannounced, ultimate issues underlying it. The promised goal of church growth may not be the only or the significance consequence to consider in our choice.

Appendix

| Historical Narrative                                    | <i>Legal Sections</i>                                |
|---|--|
| Chap. 1: Oppression in Egypt                            |  |
| Chaps. 2-6: Commission of Moses                         |  |
| Chaps. 7-11: Exodus-Deliverance from Egypt              |  |
|   | <i>Chap. 12: The Passover</i>                        |
|   | <i>Chap. 13:1-10: The Feast of Unleaven Bread</i>    |
| Chaps. 13:11-18:27: Exodus-Journey to Mt. Sinai         |  |
| Chap. 19: Assembly at Mt. Sinai                         |  |
|   | <i>Chaps. 20-23: The Book of the Covenant</i>        |
| Chap. 24: Report to the people and return to Mt. Sinai  |  |
|   | <i>Chaps. 25-31: Instructions for the Tabernacle</i> |
| Chaps. 32-35: The Golden Calf Incident                  |  |
| <b>Chaps. 35-40: The Construction of the Tabernacle</b> |  |