

What is a golden calf?

By [Steve Woolley](#)

April 19, 2016

What exactly is a golden calf? You know the story. Moses was up on the mountain for a long time working with God on plans for a place of worship and the rituals to go along with it. Meanwhile, the people down below figured he had abandoned them and asked Aaron to do the same according to their own plans, which he did by constructing a golden calf and declaring a festival to YHWH. He didn't declare a festival to some other god, he declared it to the LORD, and that was just fine with the people.

I don't think this story is about a statue of a calf made of gold, nor do I think it's about worshiping idols instead of the LORD. To leave it at that makes it too easy for us to dismiss it as a sin of those people back then that had nothing to do with us. My guess is that it has more to do with human anxiety about who we are, where we're going, and what it means. In the absence of definitive answers from God, we create our own. And why not? It relieves our anxiety and allows us to get on with life with some confidence, even if that confidence is misplaced.

One way to resolve our anxiety is to deny the existence of God altogether. Get God out of the way, and we can work our way through life as best we can according to whatever rules we create or adopt. I call it the video game approach to life and religion. Another is to stubbornly adhere to the rules of the religious tradition of our choice, or its corollary, to adhere to the rules of the religious tradition in which we were raised. These rules; are they not the very essence of a golden calf, even if they are not material statues?

It's not that rules are unimportant. Moses and God worked out a ton of them, which God, over a succession of millennia, amended, clarified, repealed, and added to. We have several problems with that. First, we lack the patience to wait for God to speak through the ones whom God has chosen to speak on God's behalf. Scripture has a way of compressing time, so it's not obvious to the average reader that centuries pass until the people of God are able to comprehend a further revelation from God. Then, when the time comes, we tend to reject it as an unwelcome disruption of the way things are supposed to be. In the meantime, we have our own ideas about what God should be saying. When we put them into practice, they become our golden calves.

Second, we have a hard time discerning who has the legitimate authority to speak on God's behalf. Why shouldn't the people of Israel turn to Aaron? Wasn't he second in command? Wasn't he the principal spokesman? Couldn't he wield the magic rod, just as Moses could? Think about how hard it was for us to discern that an obscure, young, black preacher from Atlanta might actually be the one authorized by God to reveal something new from God about race, justice, and mercy. That was 50 years ago and some of us are still struggling with it. When I stand in the pulpit on Sunday mornings, I'm well aware that there is another preacher down the street proclaiming an opposing message. Is God speaking through one of us, either of us, or perhaps partially in each of us? It would help if God would be more clear about these things because we are not good at discernment.

Third, when we do hear the authoritative voice of God, we are dismayed that not everyone has heard the same thing at the same time. We Episcopalians have spent the better part of a century discerning what we are confident is the authoritative word of God about sexuality. How can it be that others in our Anglican Communion have not also heard that word? Why are other denominations so slow to catch on? Are they deaf to the injustices that we have tolerated for thousands of years? Can't they hear what Jesus is clearly saying? No, they can't. Maybe the time is not yet right for them. Gamaliel was right. If it is from God, it will prevail. If not, it

will fade away. Patience is called for, but patience does not mean doing nothing. It means proclaiming boldly God's word as we understand it without undue anxiety over whether others are able to hear it.

Our faith is littered with a trail of golden calves with more to come. We don't recognize them because they don't look like golden calves. It's a wonder that God puts up with us, much less loves us. But God does, and that's enough.

*Originally posted at [Country Parson](#)*