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CHAPTER ONE

What the World Needs Now

IN 1977, MARIA RUBIO OF LAKE ARTHUR, New Mexico, was assembling a burrito when she noticed that the skillet marks on one of her tortillas resembled the face of Jesus. Excited, she showed it to her husband and neighbors, and they all agreed that there was a face etched on the tortilla and that it truly bore a resemblance to the familiar iconic Roman Catholic images of Jesus.

So she went to her priest to have the tortilla blessed. She testified that the tortilla had changed her life, and Mr. Rubio agreed that she had been a more peaceful, happy, submissive wife since the tortilla had arrived. The priest, not accustomed to blessing tortillas, was somewhat reluctant but agreed to do it.

Mrs. Rubio took the tortilla home, put it in a shadow-box frame with piles of cotton to make it look like it was floating on clouds. Mr. Rubio built a special altar for it to rest on. They put the whole thing in a wooden utility shack in the backyard and opened the little shrine to visitors. Within a few months, more than eight thousand people came to the Shrine of the Jesus of the Tortilla, and all of them agreed that the face in the burn marks on the tortilla was the face of Jesus—except for one reporter who said he thought it looked like Leon Spinks, world heavy-weight boxing champion at the time. (Spinks was famously unattractive because he was missing most of his front teeth.)

Within two years, more than 35,000 people visited the shrine. For twenty-eight years pilgrims kept coming to see the Holy Tortilla. Over time, the burn marks faded and the image was hard to make out, but people still wanted to worship at the shrine.

Then in 2005, Mrs. Rubio's granddaughter took the tortilla to school for show-and-tell. Someone accidentally dropped it and it shattered. Mrs. Rubio kept the shadow-box, now with only fragments of the shattered tortilla floating on the cotton clouds, but no one seemed interested any more and the Rubio family finally closed the deteriorating shrine.

I remember when I first read about the tortilla apparition. It seemed like a bizarre, one-of-a-kind throwback to medieval superstition. But in the years since, I've grown accustomed to hearing similar stories. People have claimed to see images of Jesus in the toppings on a pizza, in scorch-patterns on a piece of toast, in oil spots on a garage floor, in the brown blotches on a banana, in tree-ring formations, in a misshapen Cheeto, in the rusty buildup next to a leaky bathtub, in the burn marks on a grilled-cheese sandwich, in water-stains on a wall, in countless other tortillas, and in too many other odd and out-of-the-way places to enumerate. Such stories turn up on the internet at least monthly. Invariably, people flock to see and worship the apparitions.

It seems incredible that so many people would treat objects like burnt tortillas, misshapen Cheetos, and rust stains as objects of veneration. But the sad truth is that such a distorted concept of worship is actually easier to find nowadays than authentic worship based on sound, biblical principles. Tragically, although the Bible is clear about how and whom and when we are to worship, little genuine worship takes place throughout most of the world today.

I have often thought that worship must be one of the most misunderstood doctrines in all the Scriptures. That is spiritually debilitating, because worship is at the center of everything Scripture commands of us. In other words, if you are not a true worshiper, everything else in your life will be spiritually out of sync. Conversely, nothing will accelerate your spiritual growth and sanctification than gaining a right understanding of true worship.

WORSHIP IN THE BIBLE

The theme of worship dominates the Bible. In Genesis, we discover that the fall came when Adam failed to worship God by obeying the one command God gave. In Revelation we learn that all of history culminates in an eternal worshipping community in the presence of a loving God. From the beginning in Genesis all the way through to the consummation in Revelation, the doctrine of worship is woven into the warp and woof of the biblical text.

Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and called it the greatest commandment: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:29-30). That is a call for worship, and by identifying it as the foremost of all God’s commandments, He was emphatically affirming worship as the universal first priority.

Exodus 20 records the giving of the Ten Commandments. The very first of those commandments calls for and regulates worship:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. [vv. 2–5]

In the Old Testament, worship covered all of life; it was supposed to be a continual preoccupation for the people of God. For example, the Tabernacle was designed and laid out to emphasize the priority of worship. The description of its details require seven chapters—243 verses—in Leviticus. Yet only 31 verses in Genesis are devoted to the creation of the world.

The Tabernacle was designed *only* for worship. It was the place where God met His people. To use it for anything but worship would have been considered the grossest blasphemy. In the Tabernacle there were no seats.

The Israelites didn't go there to sit and be ministered to, and they certainly didn't go there for entertainment. They went there to worship God and serve Him. If they had a meeting for any other purpose, they had it somewhere else.

The arrangement of the camp suggests that worship was central to all other activity. The Tabernacle was at the hub of the camp. Immediately next to it were the priests who led in the worship. A little farther out from the Tabernacle were the Levites, who were involved in service. Beyond that were the various tribes, each one facing toward the center, the place of worship.

All the political, social, and religious activity in Israel revolved around the law. Critical to the law was the list of ceremonial offerings described in Leviticus 1–7, all of which were acts of worship. The first offering on the list is the burnt offering, which was unique because it was completely consumed—offered totally to God. No part was shared either by the priests or by the offerer, as in other offerings.

Thus the burnt offering was the most significant illustration of worship. In fact, the altar on which all the offerings were given was known as the altar of the burnt offering. Whenever the offerings are referred to in Scripture, the burnt offering appears at the beginning of the list, because when anyone comes to God he is to come first of all in an act of worship, where everything is given to God. That is how the law of God graphically reinforced worship as the supreme priority in the life of Israel.

Moses' law spelled out exactly how the implements used in the worship services were to be made. For example, Exodus 30:34–36 gives a prescription for incense. Incense is symbolic of worship in the Scriptures, because its fragrance rises into the air as true worship rises to God. Verses 37–38 sound a warning about the incense:

The incense which you shall make, you shall not make in the same proportions for yourselves; it shall be holy to you for the Lord. Whoever shall make any like it, to use as perfume, shall be cut off from his people.

In effect, God was saying, "Here is a recipe for a special perfume, emblematic of worship. This perfume is to be a unique and holy perfume.

If anyone dares to make this perfume for himself, just to smell better, I will kill him.”

Clearly, there is something so unique, so holy about worship that it is set utterly apart from anything else in the human dimension. No one may take from God that which He has devised for His own glory!

But that perfume symbolizes something much more significant than any compound of inert ingredients: you and me. Our lives are to be like that perfume—holy, acceptable, fragrant—ascending to God as a sweet-smelling odor (see Romans 12:1 and 2 Corinthians 2:15). The person who uses his life for any purpose other than worship—no matter how noble that purpose may seem—is guilty of a grave sin. It is the same sin as that of an Israelite who misused the holy incense—a sin so serious that under the law it was punishable by death.

WHEN WORSHIP IS WRONG

God repeatedly judged those who failed to worship Him properly. When the people of Israel made and worshiped a golden calf, God mercifully mitigated His initial righteous reaction, which would have been the utter destruction of the nation. Instead, He slaughtered only three thousand of them (Exodus 32:7–28). That act of judgment stands as a graphic illustration of how God feels about false worship.

Leviticus 10 describes the ordination to the priesthood of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron the high priest. They had waited all through the years of their childhood and youth to become priests, being groomed and trained and prepared for the priesthood. Now they were to be ordained.

But in their first real function as priests, they offered “strange fire.” The exact nature of their infraction is not spelled out. The Hebrew expression speaks of “unauthorized fire.” Perhaps they offered a foreign type of incense (Exodus 30:9). Perhaps they made the offering after having imbibed wine (cf. Leviticus 10:8–9). In any event, they did not do what was prescribed to be done as priests leading the people in worship. They acted independently of the revelation of God regarding proper worship, and God instantly killed both of them.

It was a sad day. After anticipating all their lives that they would lead

the people in worship, they forfeited it all with one false move the first day. They were young men, excited, filled with eagerness—well-meaning zeal, perhaps. But they disobeyed, and they were struck dead on the spot.

King Saul was guilty of a similar sin. In 1 Samuel 13:8–14, we read,

He waited seven days, according to the appointed time set by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattering from him. So Saul said, “Bring to me the burnt offering and the peace offerings.” And he offered the burnt offering. As soon as he finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him and to greet him. But Samuel said, “What have you done?” And Saul said, “Because I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the appointed days, and that the Philistines were assembling at Michmash, therefore I said, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not asked the favor of the Lord.’ So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering.” Samuel said to Saul, “You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, for now the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure. The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the Lord has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you.”

Saul decided to usurp the role of a priest. He departed from God’s prescribed method of worship, and it cost him and his descendants the throne.

One of the most telling accounts in the Old Testament is the story of how Uzzah lost his life. Uzzah was apparently a Kohathite. The Kohathites had one task, and that was to transport the Ark of the Covenant. One of the basic principles they learned was never to touch the ark. It was supposed to be carried by poles pushed through rings, and the Kohathites transported it on their shoulders in a manner explicitly prescribed in Numbers 4:5–6. Verse 15 says that it was to be covered care-

fully “so that they will not touch the holy objects and die.”

That was *God’s* method. Second Samuel 6:3, 6–7 describes Uzzah’s method:

They placed the ark of God on a new cart that they might bring it from the house of Abinadab which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were leading the new cart. . . . But when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out toward the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen nearly upset it. And the anger of the Lord burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence; and he died there by the ark of God.

Uzzah, in disobedience to the divinely ordained method, was allowing the Ark to be transported on a cart. It was “a new cart,” suggesting that the men transporting the ark had some sense of the holiness of their task. They didn’t just throw it on an old hay wagon. But neither did they perform their task as God had expressly commanded. So as the cart bumped along the road, it almost overturned. Uzzah, trained all his life to protect the Ark of the covenant, reached out to stop it from falling off the cart. He touched it, and God slew him on the spot.

THOSE WHO OFFER SELF-STYLED
WORSHIP ARE UNACCEPTABLE TO
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THEIR GOOD INTENTIONS.

Uzzah was surely well-intentioned. It may seem as if he were only trying to do his job by protecting the Ark, but he was malfunctioning. He was endeavoring to carry out a responsibility before God in a way that was

not in accord with the revelation God had given. He may have seen his act as one of worship, an attempt to preserve the holiness of God, but he defiled the Ark by the touch of his hand, and it cost him his life.

All these incidents teach us that God will not accept deviant worship. Some would insist that any kind of sincere worship is acceptable to God, but that is simply not true. The Bible clearly teaches that those who offer self-styled worship are unacceptable to God, regardless of their good intentions. No matter how pure our motivation may seem or how sincere we are in our attempt, if we fail to worship God as He has commanded, He cannot bless us.

FOUR KINDS OF UNACCEPTABLE WORSHIP

Scripture suggests at least four categories of deviant worship. One is *the worship of false gods*. There is no other God but the God of the Bible, and He is a jealous God who will not tolerate the worship of another. In Isaiah 48:11, God says; “My glory I will not give to another.” That is an echo of Isaiah 42:8: “I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images.” Exodus 34:14 says, “You shall not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”

Yet most of the world worships false gods. Romans 1:21 indicts all of humanity for this tendency. Speaking of the entire human race in its fallen, lost condition, Paul writes, “Even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks.”

Paul then outlines the history of our race’s descent into deeper and more wicked forms of false worship. It’s significant that the very essence of human depravity as Paul describes it is bound up in false worship—beginning with a refusal to worship God as we ought. Those who turn away from the true God invariably make their own idols to worship—and that leads inexorably to more and more overtly wicked expressions of false religion. Paul sums it up in the fewest possible words: “Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures” (vv. 22–23).

Verse 24 then tells the bitter consequences of worshipping false gods:

“Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.” Verse 26 says, “God gave them over to degrading passions.” Verse 28 adds, “God gave them over to a depraved mind.”

So the result of improper worship is that God simply gives the idolaters over to their sin and its consequences. Can you think of anything worse? Their sin increasingly becomes the dominating factor in their lives, and ultimately, in Romans 1:32–2:1, we learn that they face judgment without any excuses.

Everyone worships. We are spiritual creatures, and the drive to worship is one of the basic human needs God designed into our hearts. When people reject God, they invariably worship false gods. That is true even of an atheist. He worships himself. That, of course, is what God forbade in the first commandment.

False gods may be either material objects or mythical, supernatural beings. Material gods may be worshiped even without the conscious thought that they are deities. Job 31:24–28 says,

If I have put my confidence in gold,
And called fine gold my trust,
If I have gloated because my wealth was great,
And because my hand had secured so much;
If I have looked at the sun when it shone
Or the moon going in splendor,
And my heart became secretly enticed,
And my hand threw a kiss from my mouth,
That too would have been an iniquity calling for judgment,
For I would have denied God above.

Job refused the inclination to worship his material wealth. If you worship what you possess—if you center your life on yourself, your possessions, or even your needs—you have denied God. You have in effect made your possessions your god.

Habakkuk 1:15–16 describes the false worship of the Chaldeans: “The Chaldeans bring all [the righteous] up with a hook, drag them away

with their net, and gather them together in their fishing net. Therefore they rejoice and are glad. Therefore they offer a sacrifice to their net and burn incense to their fishing net.” “Their net” was their military might, and the god they worshiped was armed power—a classic example of the kind of false worship whole nations frequently fall prey to.

Some formulate supernatural gods, imaginary personal deities. That, too, of course, is unacceptable. First Corinthians 10:20 says that things sacrificed to idols are in actuality offered to demons. In other words, when people worship false beings, they are really just worshiping the demons that impersonate those false gods. Most do this without recognizing the demonic element in their worship, but it is nonetheless a diabolical false religion.

Acts 17:29 contains a marvelous observation by Paul. “Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.” We are made in God’s image, and we are not silver, stone, and wood. How could we think that our Creator would be such?

A second kind of unacceptable worship is *the worship of the true God in a wrong form*. Exodus 32:7–9 records God’s response when the Israelites made a golden calf to worship:

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, “Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it, and have sacrificed to it and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’”

Notice that they were paying homage with their lips to Jehovah, the One who had delivered them from Egyptian slavery. They clearly believed they were worshiping the true God—they *intended* to worship Him—but they had reduced Him to an image.

Years later, as recorded in Deuteronomy 4:14–19, Moses said to the assembled Israelites,

The Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judg-

ments, that you might perform them in the land where you are going over to possess it. So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, so that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth. And beware not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.

In other words, when God revealed Himself to the Israelites as a nation, he was not embodied in any distinct form. There were manifestations of His glory and power—the pillars of fire and smoke, the miracles, and the glory reflected in the face of Moses—but there was no tangible or visible representation of God. That is true of our heavenly Father throughout the Scriptures. Why? Because God does not wish to be reduced to an image.

**IDOLATRY DOES NOT BEGIN
WITH A SCULPTOR'S HAMMER,
IT BEGINS WITH THE MIND.**

If you think of God as an old man with a beard sitting on a throne—that's unacceptable. Idolatry does not begin with a sculptor's hammer, it begins with the mind. When we think of God, what should we visualize? Absolutely nothing. No visual conception of God could properly represent

His eternal glory. That may be why God is described as light. It is not possible to make a statue of light.

A third kind of deviant worship is *the worship of the true God in a self-styled manner*. As we have seen, Nadab and Abihu, Saul, and Uzzah were all guilty of worshiping God in their own way without regard to His revelation. That is false worship just as surely as worshiping a stone idol is false worship, and God does not accept it.

The Pharisees tried to worship the true God with a self-styled system, and Jesus told them, “You yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition” (Matthew 15:3). Their worship was an abomination.

A far more subtle kind of false worship than any of the three we have mentioned is *the worship of the true God in the right way, with a wrong attitude*.

If we eliminate all false gods, all images of the true God, and all self-styled modes of worship, our worship will still be unacceptable if the heart attitude is not right. Perhaps you don’t worship false gods or images of the true God. And maybe you are not guilty of inventing your own way to worship. But do you worship with the right attitude? If not, your worship is unacceptable to God.

Is your whole heart in worship? When it comes time to give, do you give the best of all you have? Is your inner being filled with awe and reverence? Let’s be candid: none of us can answer those questions in the affirmative without hesitation and without qualification.

In Malachi 1 God denounces the people of Israel for the inadequacy of their worship. “You are presenting defiled food upon My altar,” He said (v. 7). They were treating the matter of worship with disdain, with flippancy. By offering blind, lame, and sick animals (v. 8) instead of bringing the best they had, they were demonstrating contempt for the seriousness of worship. In verse 10, God says, “I am not pleased with you . . . nor will I accept an offering from you.” He declined to accept their worship, because their attitude was not right.

Amos also gives insight into the intensity of God’s hatred of worship with the wrong attitude. In Amos 5:21, God says,

I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Hosea saw the same truth. Hosea 6:4–6 says,

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? For your loyalty is like a morning cloud and like the dew which goes away early. Therefore I have hewn them in pieces by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of My mouth; and the judgments on you are like the light that goes forth. For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

It was hypocrisy, not worship. The offerings were empty. Like many today, they were guilty of giving God the symbol, but not the reality.

Isaiah 1:11–15 contains the same indictment:

“What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” says the Lord. “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle; And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats. When you come to appear before Me, Who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen.”

Read carefully the minor prophets. The prophecies of Israel's and Judah's destruction are related to the fact that they did not worship God with the proper attitude.

OUR GREATEST NEED

Perhaps the greatest need in all of Christendom is for a clear understanding of the biblical teaching about worship. When the church fails to worship properly, it fails in every other area. And the world is suffering because of its failure.

Much of the world offers false worship, the kind of worship that focuses on a tortilla, on material things, on ritual or form, or even on divine blessings. If not those things, we offer the kind of worship that follows a self-styled form designed to please the worshipers. And even in the best of cases, our worship is offered with a wrong or half-hearted attitude. God will not accept such worship on its own merits. The Bible is explicit on that.

We must seek a fresh understanding of worship. God has commanded it. Our ministry depends on it. It is crucial to our relationship to Him and our testimony in this world. We cannot afford to ignore it. Too much is at stake.