

The Regulative (vs Normative) Principle of Worship

The **Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW)** is a theological principle—most often associated with the Reformed tradition—that states:

- In congregational worship, only what **God explicitly commands in Scripture is permitted.** (Everything else is forbidden.)

This is contrasted with the **Normative Principle of Worship (NPW):**

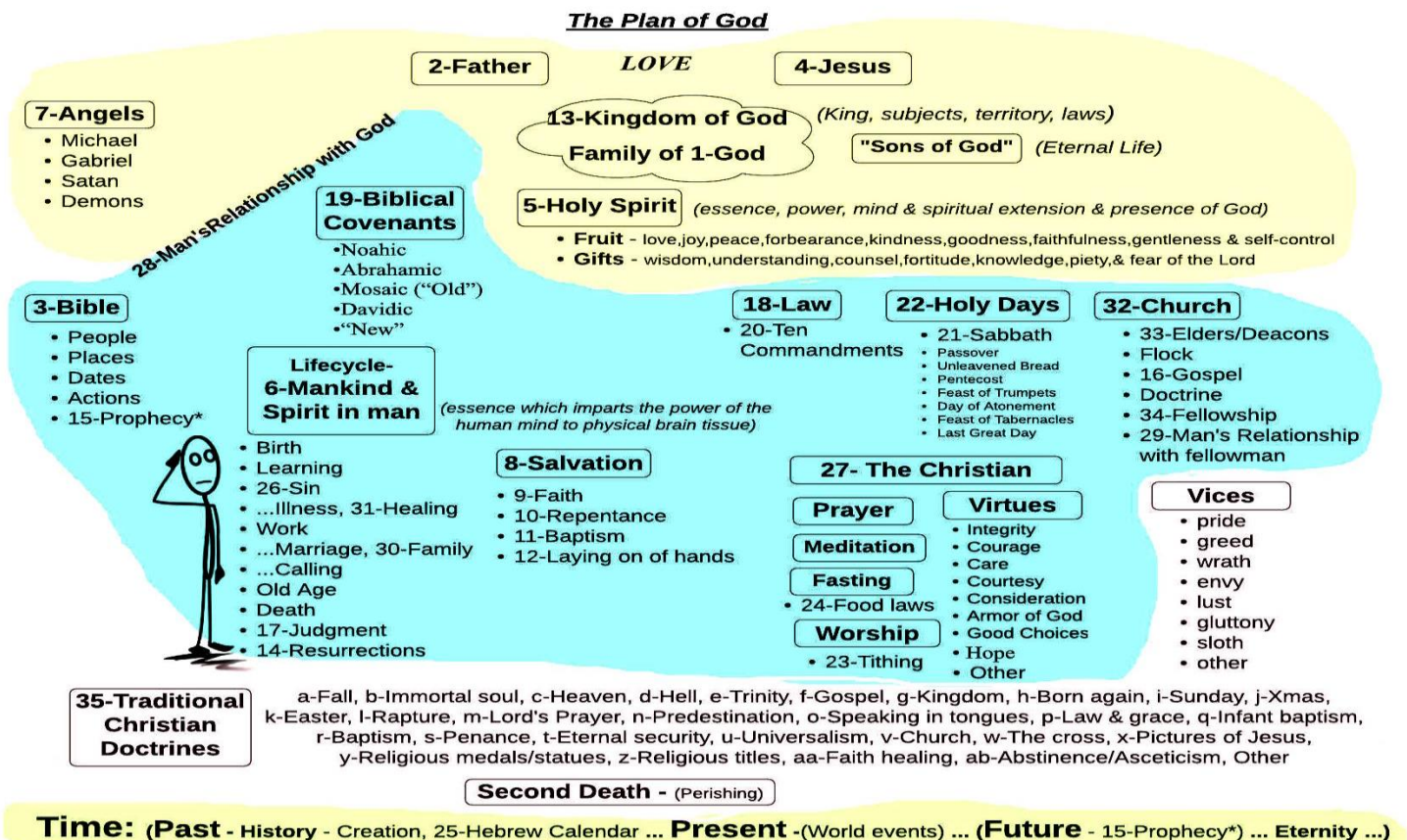
- **Anything is permitted in worship unless Scripture forbids it.**

Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW) “Core Idea”

God alone has the authority to determine **how** He is to be worshipped. Therefore, the church must practice in worship only those elements that Scripture *commands, institutes, or clearly warrants.*

Deu 12:29-32 "When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, **take heed** to yourself that you are **not** ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do **not** inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall **not** worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which **He hates** they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. **Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.**

In today’s message we’ll explore these two contrasting approaches to Worship ... which will help us understand how **Christian worship** can be so different using the example of Christmas.



Christmas 2025



From: *** (My sister-in-law)
Date: Sun, 30 Nov 2025 at 20:29
Subject: Santa
To: Jim French <jimfrench007@gmail.com>

Hi Brother

Would you be a great brother & uncle & consider **being Santa**, Christmas Eve for me?

William is too busy with all his grandkids

I haven't done it in a couple of years

Just an idea for all these "greats" (grandkids) we have

No pressure

Just let me know cause it will take me a few weeks to get things together

Thanks ***

The last time I observed Christmas was as a 14 year old in 1974 ...

- I started attending the Worldwide Church of God in the fall of 1975 (where I attended a Teen "winter camp" activity where the minister drove me home on Dec 25th)
- I explained to my older brother that my church chooses to NOT keep Christmas ... that I did not want to take part in gift exchanges ... & I did my best to stay away from holiday celebrations at home .
- After a number of years of **not attending** December functions ... (My siblings "arranged things" so I could come early for the family meal & leave early before any Christmas activities began ... it was a great accommodation on their part - for me)

From: **Jim French** <jimfrench007@gmail.com>

Date: Sun, 30 Nov 2025 at 23:19

Subject: Re: Santa

To: *** (My sister in law)

Hi ***

I am assuming you **accidentally** sent this request to the wrong brother?!?

(I am the brother that tactfully **sneaks out of the gathering** ... so that I am only attending a "family get together" ... and am absent from any part of the Christmas festivities !?!)

I hope you are not offended

Jim

PS ... Here is a pretty good list from "Artificial Intelligence" (ChatGPT) to answer the question about Christmas ... (ie I did not spend any time on this list -- and you don't need to read this) ... Many of the points below are well known and found in any encyclopaedia articles)

What are the reasons why some Christians do not observe Christmas?

Here are the **main reasons why some Christians choose not to observe Christmas**. These reasons vary by denomination, personal conviction, and approach to Scripture:

1. No Biblical Command or Example

- Christmas is **not commanded in Scripture**, nor is Jesus' birth celebrated annually by the early church.
- Some believers follow a principle that **worship practices should have direct biblical support** (Regulative Principle of Worship).

- **Deuteronomy 12:32** Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.
- **Matthew 15:9** In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men
- **Colossians 2:20–22** ...why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations... according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

2. Date Not Tied to Jesus' Actual Birth

- Scripture does not give the exact date of Jesus' birth.
- December 25 is widely understood to have been chosen **centuries later**, not from a biblical source.



- **Luk_2:8** Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. (*Shepherds are out **March-October** ... By December, the region around Bethlehem/Jerusalem experiences the start of the rainy season, colder nights, and possibly snow or frost — making it harsh & unsuitable for keeping flocks overnight in the open*)

3. Concerns About Pagan Associations

Some point to:

- Roman festivals around the winter solstice (Saturnalia, Sol Invictus ... ie sun worship).
- Various pre-Christian customs incorporated into later Christmas traditions. Even though the meaning has changed for many Christians, some avoid the holiday because of these historical connections.

- **Deuteronomy 12:29–31** ...do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way..."
- **Jeremiah 10:2–5** Do not learn the way of the Gentiles... For one cuts a tree from the forest... They decorate it with silver and gold... (*ie tree worship / idol worship*)
- **2 Corinthians 6:14–17** ...what accord has Christ with Belial? ...Come out from among them and be separate..."

4. Over-Commercialization and Materialism

- Many Christians reject the holiday because it has become **commercial, consumer-driven, and entertainment-focused**, overshadowing spiritual worship.
- They may feel it encourages **covetousness, debt, and distraction** rather than devotion.

- **1 John 2:15–16** Do not love the world or the things in the world...
- **Matthew 6:19–21** Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth...
- **Colossians 3:2** Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

5. The Holiday Can Eclipse Biblical Holy Days

- Some Christians—especially those who observe *biblical festivals*—believe God already appointed festivals in Scripture (e.g., Passover, Feast of Tabernacles).
- They prefer to *honor those* rather than “traditions” created later by the church.

- **Leviticus 23:1–2** The feasts of the LORD... which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations... Vs 14 **statutes forever** throughout your generations in all your dwellings
- **Mark 7:6–8** ...laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men

6. Mixture of Sacred and Secular Traditions

- Christmas customs often combine biblical themes with:
 - Santa Claus
 - Christmas trees
 - Yule logs
 - Gift exchanges
- Some believers feel these additions dilute or distort the gospel message.



Deuteronomy 12:4 You shall not worship the Lord your God with such things.
Exodus 32:1–6 *The golden calf incident is often cited as an example of worshiping the true God using someone else's methods.*

7. Concern About Idolatry or Symbolic Misuse

Some Christians connect verses like:

- **Jeremiah 10:2–5** (about cutting a tree, decorating it, etc.)
- **Deuteronomy 12:29–32** (warnings against adopting pagan worship)
- **2 Corinthians 6:14–18** (separation from idolatry)

They see modern traditions as conflicting with these passages.

8. Focus on Christ's Birth vs. His Mission

- Some argue Scripture places far greater emphasis on **Christ's death and resurrection** than His birth.
- They prefer to devote attention to Christ's teachings & the gospel rather than a cultural holiday

- **1 Corinthians 2:2** For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.
- **Romans 6:3–5** *Emphasis on Christ's death, burial, & resurrection as the core of the faith.*

9. Historical Objections by Reformers and Early Protestants

For example:

- Some Puritans outlawed Christmas observance in the 1600s.
- They considered it an unbiblical feast and associated with rowdy celebrations. Certain conservative Christian groups continue these convictions.

○ **2Cor 6:17** Therefore "COME OUT FROM AMONG THEM AND **BE SEPARATE**, SAYS THE LORD. DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN, AND I WILL RECEIVE YOU."

10. Avoiding Tradition for Tradition's Sake

- Some believers are wary of adopting practices simply because they are long-standing traditions.
- They want their worship to be **intentional, pure, and Scripture-centered**.

○ **1 Peter 1:18** ...from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers.
○ **1 Corinthians 4:6** ... that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written

11. Personal or Conscience-Based Reasons

- A believer might feel Christmas distracts them from the Lord.
- Others may have had past experiences or convictions that lead them to abstain.

○ The practise of lying to your children is problematic for some
○ According to a survey cited by a behavioral-health provider, nearly **1 in 3 adults** say that compared to other times of year, the holiday season triggers mental-health challenges such as "anxiety, depression, or isolation."
○ many reported stress resulting from high expectations (44 %), disappointment (32 %), and stress from family gatherings (38 %)
○ Around 38% of people in another survey said stress levels increased during the holiday season, with contributing factors like lack of time, money pressures, social and family demands, and the burden of "holiday perfectionism."

On the Other hand ...

Top reasons many Christians *do* observe Christmas

(ie In the view of the Normative Principle of Worship (NPW)...

Anything is permitted in worship unless Scripture forbids it.)

1. To Celebrate the Incarnation — God Becoming Man

Many Christians see Christmas as a time to remember and rejoice that:

- **Jesus Christ came into the world as Savior**
- God fulfilled His promise to send the Messiah

Key Scriptures:

- **John 1:14** – "The Word became flesh..."
- **Matthew 1:21–23** – "He will save His people from their sins."

Biggest problem ... These worshippers ignore the Holy Days God gave to us

2. To Celebrate Christ's Birth as Told in Scripture

While the date is not specified, the **event** is celebrated because Scripture devotes real attention to His birth.

Key Scriptures:

- **Luke 2:1–20** – The nativity story
- **Matthew 2:1–12** – The Magi



Christians observe Christmas as a way of honoring these events.

Biggest problem ... These worshippers ignore that the date selected for Christmas is incorrect AND apparently was chosen to entice pagans to become Christians -- as is evident in all of the pagan practices & symbols (sun worship, sex & fertility symbols) that exist with Christmas to this day. This syncretism is condemned in scripture. (& the Magi were not at the nativity ... for them Jesus was in a house)

3. To Worship God for His Gift of Salvation

Christmas is seen as a season to:

- Give thanks
- Worship
- Praise God for His mercy and love

Key Scriptures:

- **Luke 2:10–11** – “Good tidings of great joy...”
- **John 3:16** – God gave His Son.

Biggest problem ... This is an unbalanced message ... Jesus also says...
Mat 10:34 "**Do not think** that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.
... and ... the Holy Days -- given by God -- **already provide** several days to Worship God for His Gift of Salvation

4. To Remember Fulfilled Prophecy

Many Christians remember Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in Jesus' birth.

Key Scriptures:

- **Isaiah 7:14** – “A virgin shall conceive...”
- **Micah 5:2** – Birth in Bethlehem.

Christmas is a reminder that God keeps His promises.

Biggest problem ... Although this is technically true (& awesome) ... it is largely ignored or unknown to the vast majority of Christians who are distracted by the gifts (to each other - not Jesus), decorations & “pass the Egg Nog” parties

5. To Teach Children About Jesus

For many Christian families, Christmas is a unique opportunity to:

- Teach children the story of Jesus' birth
- Instill biblical truths about Christ, salvation, and God's love
- Create Christ-centered traditions

Biggest problem ... Although this is technically true (& awesome) ... it is largely ignored or unknown to the vast majority of Christians who are distracted by the gifts (to each other - not Jesus), decorations & “pass the Egg Nog” parties

6. To Practice Joy, Giving, and Generosity

Christians often connect Christmas with:

- Charity
- Compassion
- Giving to the needy

Because God gave us His best, we give to others.

Key Scriptures:

- **Acts 20:35** – “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”
- **2 Corinthians 9:15** – “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!”



7. To Use the Season for Evangelism

Many Christians find Christmas a unique time when:

- People are more open to hearing about Jesus
- Churches host special services or outreach events
- Music and Scripture can point unbelievers to Christ

Biggest Problem ... Some people are upset when they learn the truth about the many pagan aspects of Christmas ... A day not observed in Scripture.

8. Freedom in Christ to Honor a Day Unto the Lord

Some Christians celebrate Christmas as an expression of **Christian liberty**.

Key Scripture:

- **Romans 14:5–6** – “One person esteems one day above another... He who observes the day observes it to the Lord.”

They believe they are free to set aside a day to honor Jesus’ birth.

Biggest problem ... The context of Romans 14 is personal fast days & vegetarianism ... & not the idea that Christians can “willy nilly” decide to be indifferent to God’s Holy Days to “make up their own days” ... If someone opts to honour God with a fast day ... it doesn’t mean EVERYBODY must do it...

9. Christian Tradition and Heritage

For many, Christmas is part of a long-standing Christian tradition in the global church.

They feel:

- It strengthens community
- It unites believers across generations
- It provides continuity with the church’s history

Biggest problem ... Nostalgia & sentimental feelings are “nice” ... however, if scripture points out that God is not honoured by a day that is filled with pagan symbols & practices ... we do not need to be *pushed around* by a flawed tradition ... Instead we can answer such pressure as Peter did ... **Act 5:29** But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men.

10. To Combat Secular Versions of Christmas

Some Christians intentionally celebrate Christmas in order to:

- Reclaim the focus on Christ
- Counteract commercial, pagan, or purely cultural versions
- Remind themselves and their families of the true meaning



Biggest Problem ... It might be praiseworthy to sincerely seek to “put Christ back into Christmas” ... but ... It has been shown in many ways that Jesus *never was* present in Christmas ...

- It is not His birthday
- Scripture shows the New Testament Church never observed it
- Scripture also shows the New Testament Church (including gentile churches) observed God’s holy days instead
- God HATES when people try to worship Him via “borrowing” pagan practices

Is Santa REALLY a problem?

Why some Christians do not like or do not include Santa Claus in their celebrations

1. Santa Replaces or Competes With Christ

Many Christians object to Santa because:

- He becomes the **center** of Christmas instead of Jesus.
- Children get excited about Santa more than the Savior.
- The story of Santa can overshadow the **Incarnation** (John 1:14).

Concern: A “secular savior” replaces the true meaning of the holiday.

2. Santa Encourages Fantasy or Deception

Parents are often uncomfortable with:

- Telling children that Santa is real (flying reindeer, North Pole workshop).
- The idea of **lying** or “supporting a myth” as truth.

- **Ephesians 4:25** – “putting away lying, let each one speak truth.”
- **Proverbs 12:22** – “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord.”

3. Pagan or Non-Christian Origins

Some Christians object based on historical associations:

- Early pagan winter traditions merged into later Santa legends.
- The modern Santa draws from Nicholas of Myra, Odin myths, and modern folklore.

Even though many see him as harmless, some believers avoid anything with possible non-biblical roots.

4. Santa Imitates Divine Attributes

Some Christians are uncomfortable with Santa being described with **God-like traits**, such as:

- Omniscience (“He knows if you’ve been bad or good”)
- Omnipresence (delivers gifts everywhere in one night)
- Judgment (rewarding the good, punishing the bad)

They feel this **confuses the nature of God**, especially for children.

Biblical Foundations Often Cited for the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW)

1. God rejects worship He did not command

- **Cain and Abel** – God accepted Abel’s worship and rejected Cain’s (Gen. 4:3–5).
- **Nadab and Abihu** – Offered “strange fire...which He had not commanded” and were judged (Lev. 10:1–3).
- **The Golden Calf** – A sincere but unauthorized form of worship (Ex. 32:5–10).

2. God warns against adding to or taking away from His commandments

- **Deut. 12:32** – “You shall not add to it nor take away from it.”
- **Deut. 12:4–5, 8–14** – God chooses how and where He will be worshiped.
- **Matt. 15:9** – In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.
- **Col. 2:20–23** – Condemns “self-made religion.”

3. True worship must be in spirit and truth

- **John 4:23–24** – Worship conforms to God’s truth, not human invention.

4. The apostles set patterns for church worship

- **Acts 2:42** – Early church “continued steadfastly” in the apostles’ practices (often taken as defining the acceptable elements).

What Worship Elements Are Considered “Commanded”?

Most RPW-following churches agree on these as the **biblical elements of worship**:

1. **Reading of Scripture** (1 Tim. 4:13)
2. **Preaching/teaching the Word** (2 Tim. 4:2)
3. **Prayer** (1 Tim. 2:1–2; Acts 2:42)
4. **Singing of Psalms/hymns/spiritual songs** (Col. 3:16)
5. **Sacraments** ... Baptism (Matt. 28:19) & Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:23–26)
6. **Giving/tithes/offerings** (1 Cor. 16:1–2)
7. **A call to worship & benediction** (various examples, e.g., Num. 6:23–27)
8. **Oaths, vows, and covenant renewal** (occasional; Deut. 10:20)

Everything else—drama, dance, candles, holidays not commanded in Scripture, images, etc.—is excluded under RPW.

Why Some Christians Hold to the RPW

1. **To guard the church from human traditions.**
2. **To preserve the purity of worship** (Lev. 10:3).
3. **To ensure worship remains God-centered, not entertainment-centered**
4. **To safeguard consciences:** believers shouldn’t be required to participate in unbiblical worship practices.
5. **To honor God’s holiness and authority.**

