**Cultural Challenges**

Rom. 12:2

Introduction:

1. It always happens around this time of year.

2. Christians begin to ask questions like: “What is the origin of Christmas?” “How did Christmas start?” “Is Dec. 25th really the day Jesus was born?” “If it is associated with pagan religious celebrations should I even celebrate it at all?”

3. A simple “Google search:” “history of Christmas,” will produce all kinds of materials to help you answer such questions. (I recommend the article, by that title, by the editors at history.com.)

4. But what I am more concerned about is the more general cultural challenges that face us as Christians. How we celebrate Christmas is only one example of a cultural challenge, and in my judgment, not the most important.

5. What does the Bible say about culture? How are God’s people a unique culture? How are they influenced by worldly culture?

Discussion:

I. What is culture?

 A. “Culture” is an umbrella term that encompasses the social behavior and norms found

 in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities

 and habits of the individuals in these groups.

 B. Merriam-Webster defines culture as, “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material

 traits of a racial, religious or social group.”

 C. A cultural norm defines acceptable conduct in a particular society. It serves as a guide

 for behavior, dress, language, and demeanor and becomes the template for

 expectations in a social group.

 D. Culture is a broad concept and about any group develops its own unique identity:

 language, clothing styles, religion, dietary rules are all a part of our culture. Even

 families develop their own identity. Ex. Phyllis just made a jam cake for the holidays.

 My grandmother did it. My aunts all did it. My mother did it. It is part of my culture.

 E. To make things even more complicated we are in multiple groups with unique practices

 associated with each one. Ex. US citizen who celebrates July 4th but also a Christian

 who celebrates the Lord’s Supper on the first day of each week. I am from European

 ancestry so the clothing styles I wear and the language that I speak reflect that

 influence. I am from Kentucky, and central Kentucky and that is reflected in my accent,

 and I am from the Galloway clan who eat country ham and jam cake during the

 holidays.

II. Not all cultural influences are a bad thing, however, some cultural influences move one away from relationship to God.

 A. The nation of Israel faced this problem repeatedly.

 1. They were confronted with the cultural challenges of Egypt and Canaan (Lev. 18:1-

 5).

 a. In this particular case it affected their sexual practices.

 b. Their relationship to God disciplined their sexual practices in ways not

 characteristic of the people of Egypt and Canaan.

 2. God had restricted intermarriage with the people of Canaan recognizing that such

 intermarriage would lead to intercultural religious practices (Deut. 7:1-6).

 3. Daniel resisted the cultural practices of the Babylonians (1:8).

 4. In Isa. 52:11 God called His people to come out from Babylon and be separate (cf.

 2 Cor. 6:17).

 5. During the days of Ezra and Nehemiah there was a call for the people of God to be

 unique and separate from the nations (Ezra 9:1ff; Neh. 13:23ff).

 B. In the N.T. the church at Corinth seemed to struggle with cultural challenges.

 1. They worked to understanding about eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:4ff).

 2. They struggled with sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:9-13) and were reminded of the

 changes they had made having been washed, sanctified and justified in Jesus

 Christ (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

 3. They were called to be separate with the same language that Israel had been called

 to be separate (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

 C. There is nothing wrong with some aspects of culture (cf. 2:16ff).

 1. Language. God was the one who gave different languages (Gen. 11). On the day

 of Pentecost those of different cultures and languages were all invited into the

 kingdom of God (Acts 2:8-11).

 2. Culturally distinct clothing is not wrong.

 3. Culturally unique music is not wrong.

 4. Culturally unique foods are not wrong.

 5. The celebration of culturally unique festivals is not wrong.

 D. When the people of God embrace cultural practices that violate or compromise their

 relationship with God that is sin.

III. Culture is a powerful influence.

 A. Israel compromised and was led into idolatry.

 1. Solomon led the way (Neh. 13:26).

 2. Moses had demanded what the king should do and not do (Deut. 17:14-20).

 B. Our culture powerfully influences us.

 1. It would have us accept various forms of sexual immorality.

 2. It would have us diminish the value of the lives of the unborn.

 3. While it pursues a course of sensuality, materialism, lust, drunkenness, and the like it

 maligns the people of God for pursuing a different course (1 Pet. 4:3-4). Cf. John

 9:22; 12:24; 16:2.

IV. What does all this have to do with Christmas?

 A. Christmas is a cultural phenomena. It provides an example of the influence of culture

 in the world.

 B. A history in brief.

 1. The middle of winter has long been a time of celebration around the world.

 Hundreds of years before the first century, early Europeans celebrated light and

 birth during the winter solstice, when the worst of winter was behind them and

 longer days of sunlight returned.

 2. In Scandinavia the Norse celebrated “Yule,” the winter solstice, in recognition of

 the return of the sun. A “Yule Log” would be set on fire and they would feast until

 the log burned out.

 3. In Germany people honored the god Oden during the mid-winter holiday.

 4. In Rome, Saturnalia was a holiday honoring Saturn, the god of agriculture. It too

 was associated with the winter solstice. It was a time hedonistic time, when food

 and drink were plentiful and the normal Roman social order was turned upside

 down. Romans also observed Juvenalia, around this same time, a feast honoring

 children. They celebrated the birthday of Mithra, the god of the sun, on

 December 25.

 5. It is commonly believed that Pope Julius I chose December 25 in an effort to

 absorb the traditions of the pagan Saturnalia festival. Apparently the idea was to

 increase the likelihood that Christmas would be popularly embraced. In the

 middle ages people attended church then celebrated in a drunken, carnival-like

 atmosphere similar to today’s Mardi Gras.

 6. When the Puritans (pilgrims) came to America they did not honor Christmas as a

 holiday. From 1659-1681 it was outlawed in Boston.

 7. It was not declared a federal holiday in the United States until 1870. That is 5

 years after the Civil War.

 8. To be sure the tradition has changed and developed since that time. Today it is a

 time of religious celebration for some people. For others it is a time of focus on

 gift giving and children. It is a time for families to come together. For merchants

 it is a time for making sales.

 C. The people of God are influenced to join the world.

 1. I am not so concerned with whether or not you celebrate Christmas, nor how you

 do so as I am that you recognize how the culture influences you.

 2. It influences you to adopt its practices. It influences you to buy and give gifts at

 this time of year. It influences you to sing certain songs, to think about certain

 things, to think in certain ways and to blend in with its expectations.

 D. Christians are a unique people.

 1. Blending in with the world is not our objective.

 2. Our uniqueness is based on our relationship with God.

 3. As such we are salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13-16).

 4. We are a chosen race, strangers and aliens in this world (1 Pet. 2:9-12), strangers

 and exiles on the earth (Heb. 11:13).

 5. We need to be careful to teach caution when negotiating with culture of the

 world. Particularly is this true in communicating to the next generation. Loyalty to

 God is our first priority. This is our culture. We are NOT loyal to the majority, nor

 to the minority. We are not loyal to the denominational ideas of our society. We

 are not loyal to the secular ideas of our society.

Conclusion:

1. Israel was absorbed into the culture of the society in which she lived. She became idolatrous and divorced from the Lord.

2. The church of the first century was warned to not be like them.

3. We need to be warned too. And take an aggressive stance in not being conformed to the world, but transformed, proving what the will of God is.