

C. Halloween

Hallowed or Harmful?

Hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, the Celts, inhabitants of Britain and Ireland, observed a festival on October 31. Unlike modern-day Halloween, theirs was no children's holiday. The Celts and their priests, the Druids, celebrated Samhain, a festival that marked the eve of the Celtic New Year, which began on November 1. The fall harvest was complete and winter loomed ahead. The Celts believed the power of the sun was fading. For the next several months, darkness would prevail.

The Celts believed during Samhain the veil separating the living from the dead was at its thinnest. They believed on the evening of October 31 evil spirits and the souls of the dead passed through the barrier and entered the world of the living. Departed family members would revisit their earthly homes. The thought was frightening — and exciting! The Celts believed these spirits and dead souls could torment the living. Crops might be destroyed, babies stolen, farm animals killed. But this was also an opportunity to commune with the spirits — and divine the future. The Devil, the lord of darkness, was ordinarily feared, but during Samhain, his power would be called on to foretell the future.

Trick Or Treat

The Druids were charged with appeasing the goblins and preventing harm to the people. Huge Samhain bonfires were lit to guide the way of the spirits. Various sacrifices, including human, were performed to assure a good year. Several ancient authors commented on the gory religious rites of the Druids.

It is believed that, like many pagan cultures around the world, the Celts left out food for the spirits, hoping that a “treat” would prevent an evil “trick.”

Centuries later, descendants of the Celts continued to observe the Samhain festival by dressing as evil spirits. They roamed from house to house demanding food in exchange for the “spirits” leaving the home unharmed. They carved demon faces in hollowed-out turnips and lighted them with candles.

That night they also practiced many customs designed to divine the future. Young people roasted nuts in Samhain fires to see which would crack first — and tell them whom they would marry. The person who retrieved an apple with his mouth from a tub of water assured himself of a lucky year. Obviously some of these customs (like “apple-bobbing”) have remained with us, strictly as amusement.

All Hallow's Eve

When Christianity began to spread through Europe in the third and fourth centuries, the pagan temples were torn down. But pagan worship never completely disappeared. The festival of Samhain remained a primary pagan festival.

Belief in spirits may have waned, but many of the old Samhain traditions continued to be practiced — especially by the children. Primarily in Ireland, children dressed as spirits went from house to house demanding a treat. If they received none, they performed an unwelcomed trick. They were play-acting the part of evil spirits that had to be appeased, just as in the old Samhain festival the people believe they really did have to appease spirits.

In the 700s AD, the Church decided to combat this festival by replacing it with a celebration of the Lord of life. Instead of honoring evil spirits and the souls of the dead, the Church chose to recognize the saints — or hallowed ones — who had lived godly lives. The Church seemed to be saying, “All right, if you must have a day to celebrate the dead, then celebrate those who died and are now with the Lord.” So November 1 came to be called All Saints’ Day, also called All Hallows’ Day. The evening before was called All Hallows’ Evening. From that we get the modern name of Halloween. But pagan customs continued. And with the growth of witchcraft in the Middle Ages, additional symbols became associated with Halloween — black cats, witches, bats, and skulls.

Halloween In America

Irish immigrants in the mid-1800s brought to America the Halloween customs with which we’re familiar — costumes, trick-or-treat, carved Jack-o-lanterns, etc. (The Jack-o-lantern is simply an American version of the hollowed-out turnip, mentioned earlier. The pumpkin did not grow in Ireland and Britain.) Unfortunately, they also brought “tricks” with them — which often involved breaking windows and over-turning sheds and outhouses.

Even though the practice of actually performing a trick if no treat is given has faded, the custom of children going “trick-or-treating” has become an established American tradition. Only in recent years have parents hesitated to send their children into the streets because of the increased danger of accidents, poisoned food, and menacing strangers.

Nonetheless, despite the dangers associated with trick-or-treating, Halloween is celebrated more than ever. In fact, the night is the second most popular party night of the year (after December 31) for “baby-boomer” adults. Many adults look at it as the one night of the year they can dress up and act foolish.

But while children and adults innocently imitate ancient Celtic customs, darker practices persist. Witches and Satanists still consider Halloween to be one of the strongest times during the year to cast a spell. On Halloween most witchcraft practitioners participate in a ritual called “drawing down the moon.” In this the chief witch of the coven (group of witches) becomes, they believe, a channel for the moon goddess. During this ritual the participants, both male and female, are “sky-clad” — that is, naked.

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The Biblical Response to Halloween

Witches and Satanists are, of course, a small minority. Few people who celebrate Halloween these days ever think about the darkness that underlies most Halloween practices. A beaming child dressed in a black pointed hat and matching gown — with a wart carefully drawn on her nose and a trick-or-treat bag held tightly in her hand — is hardly thinking of death or the spirits of departed relatives. Nor should she be. She's thinking of candy and fun. She's glowing because of her delight in her special costume. And she's anticipating the adventure of her house-to-house pilgrimage.

Merchants also look forward to October 31. The sale of candy, costumes, decorations, and party goods make Halloween one of the major retail seasons of the year. Surely, no one can deny children or adults all the Halloween fun simply because of its unsavory history. Can there really be anything wrong with this lighthearted revelry?

Does the Bible have anything to say about celebrating Halloween? In Corinth, meat that had been sacrificed to idols was sold in the market. People who bought it then ate it in honor of that particular pagan god. Speaking of his freedom to eat food that a pagan had dedicated to an idol, the apostle Paul said, "Everything is permissible" (1 Corinthians 10:23). After all, he didn't believe the pagan gods really existed.

If we apply Paul's statement to the celebration of Halloween, then one could argue that Christians can dress in ghostly costumes and practice the traditions that have been passed down from the ancient Celts. After all, the supernatural powers they tried to appease don't have power over those who belong to Christ. The Bible says that Jesus destroyed the power of death when He went to the cross. By Jesus' death and resurrection, anyone who gives his or her life to Jesus doesn't need to fear evil.

But Paul didn't stop with a statement of his freedom. He said, "Everything is permissible — but not everything is beneficial." It is in this light that Christians need to examine how to observe Halloween.

Three Reasons To Examine How You Celebrate Halloween

1. What may not hurt you may hurt others. Paul said it wouldn't harm a Christian to eat meat sacrificed to an idol. After all, the pagan gods to which the meat had been sacrificed weren't real gods. In the same light, he probably would say Christians are not prohibited from dressing in costumes and going trick-or-treating or attending Halloween parties. After all, "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one" (1 Corinthians 8:4).

But Paul went on to say, by doing what the believer was free in the Lord to do, the believer may be distressing another believer who doesn't realize he has this freedom. "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Corinthians 8:9). The weak ones would be those who still had problems with the idea of eating the food sacrificed to idols. During Halloween, little children in

particular are the weak ones. On TV, in movies, in school, and with their playmates, many children today are exposed to occult influences. We may be opening our children to these influences if we approve of these things in Halloween fun. We adults may be fully aware that we are only spoofing witches and ghosts, but the young may not be so sure. If we have given our lives to Jesus Christ, then our eternal destiny is safe in the hands of Almighty God. But that's not true of many people around us. There is a valid reason for most people to fear a "lord of death" — even if they don't take him seriously on Halloween. We who have found life in Jesus should be careful our freedom doesn't keep others from finding that same eternal life.

2. Some permissible things may hinder your Christian growth. The Bible encourages us to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus" (Hebrews 12:1-2). This one night of the year, most eyes are not fixed on Jesus but on a darker image. The Christian's "race of faith" leads him to eternal life, to a joy that has no shadow. Should we really be focusing on the devil, witches and other dark beings, even for one night?
3. God says, "Don't imitate evil!" "When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who ... practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium, or spiritist or who consults the dead," (Deuteronomy 18:9-11).

If our children dress as witches and sorcerers, if we hang cardboard ghosts in our windows, if we entertain with tales of ghouls and haunted houses — what are we doing but imitating that which is evil? As Christians we need to make it clear witches and evil spirits are not funny and are not harmless, even if the people in witch costumes are only play-acting.

Are There Alternatives?

As Christians, we have plenty of reason to celebrate. While the world around us focuses on activities honoring fear and death, we can celebrate the One who brings life. The following ideas might help you celebrate October 31 in a way that's joyful for you and your family:

1. Celebrate All Saints' Day. Protestants shy away from honoring saints. Their reluctance generally is based on a fear that the honor will cross the line into worship or prayer to saints. We are to worship and pray to no one but God.

However, there is a good biblical basis for looking to those who have faithfully followed God in the past: Hebrews 11 has a roll call of believers who have set examples for us. But in his Letters to the Corinthians, Paul makes it abundantly clear he and other saints are only servants — men and women like ourselves who are following God. And it is God and God alone to whom we look in our worship and prayers. But with nearly 2,000 years of church history, we can well remember many faithful

believers whose lives can encourage us in our walk with the Lord. That can include not only famous figures from the church's history, but also the saints we have known personally — people in our own family and in our own church who are now with the Lord. While the Celts trembled at the thought of their departed kin returning on Samhain, we can celebrate Halloween and All Saints Day by joyfully recalling our own departed saints. (Christians from many Protestant traditions may want to recall that October 31 is also Reformation Day, celebrating Martin Luther's beginning the Reformation by posting his "Ninety-five Theses" on the church door.)

2. Have a different kind of party. You can have a fall harvest party, an All Saint's Day party, or simply a costume party. Have children (and maybe adults too) dress up as biblical characters and/or figures from Christian history. Or find some other positive theme. Some Christians plan a "Fools for Christ" party (see 1 Corinthians 4:10). This involves costumes and craziness, but none of the traditional symbols of death and witchcraft. Whatever you choose, avoid the usual Halloween symbols in decorations and activities. The way to "celebrate the dead" is by honoring God's saints, already in heaven, part of the body of Christ of which the living saints are a part.
3. Hold a Bible study on what God says about the occult and witchcraft. This might be especially good for teenagers, since they are probably coming into frequent contact with influences of this type. This may sound farfetched to you, but in recent years there has been an amazing growth of witchcraft and Satanism in the U.S. Some New Age cultists are attracted to many aspects of witchcraft, especially the ideas of tapping the "powers of the universe" and of controlling our own destinies.
4. Use trick-or-treating as an opportunity to tell others about the love of Jesus. Most Christian bookstores carry small pamphlets about the Lord — designed especially for children on Halloween. These could be taped to candy and dropped into each trick-or-treat bag.
5. Gather for a prayer and praise meeting. During this night when Satanists and witches' covens meet to cast their spells and perform grotesque rituals, it seems appropriate for believers to gather to praise the one and only God. Praise God for His victory over death, Satan, hell and all evil. (Recall Paul's words in Romans 16:20: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.") And pray for all the people who don't know Jesus Christ wants to give them peace with God and eternal life. Pray Jesus will reveal Himself to their minds and spirits.

Whatever you do on Halloween, use this biblical guideline as you make your plans: "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

What About the Lord of Life?

Halloween's earliest origins reflect a fear of a lord of death that was common among ancient pagan cultures. However, despite man's advances in science and philosophy, death remains for many a troubling event they cannot avoid.

The Bible says we have a spirit which, unlike our physical body, endures beyond the grave. However, the Bible also says our spirit is subject to death as well. But God offers us eternal life for our spirits. How do we get it?

First, we must understand we all will be held accountable for the choices we make. If we choose to ignore God, we'll face eternal separation — death — from Him (Romans 6:23, Hebrews 9:27). Nothing we can do, no matter how good it may be, can make us good enough to have a relationship with God without Jesus Christ (Titus 3:5, Ephesians 2:8,9).

But God sent Jesus — our Lord of Life — to be the bridge back to right standing with God. Christ's death on the cross paid the penalty we faced for going our own way (Romans 5:8, 1 Peter 3:18).

If you want to receive the eternal life God offers, you must invite Jesus into your life to be your Lord and Savior (John 1:12, Revelation 3:20). Why not invite Jesus into your life right now? Pray this prayer: "Jesus, I ask you to come into my life. I want to turn from living my life under my own control. Come now and live your life in me. Cleanse me from my sins. I receive you as my Lord and my Savior. I will live for you all the days of my life. Amen."

If you prayed this prayer from your heart, you can have absolute assurance you have eternal life. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24).