

The History of Halloween -- It's Probably Not What You Think

by Dennis Rupert, pastor Morning Star Presbyterian Church (updated 10/25/2008)

This article has been carefully researched in an attempt to separate fact from hype and exaggeration. Sources include scholarly works by folklorists, books by Celtic experts, internet sites, and various reference works. I read and talked with pagan sources to find out how they viewed Halloween, but did not rely upon them for information on the origins of Halloween. I am especially indebted to folklorist W.J. Bethancourt III for initially bringing this history to my attention. I have confirmed his research by my own limited study and highly recommend his site as the first place to view for information on Halloween practices (<http://www.featherlessbiped.com/halloween/hallows.htm>).

On October 31st, you will likely see witches, ghosts, goblins, skeletons, demons, and other evil characters knocking at your door and hollering "trick or treat", and they will expect a treat or you will be tricked. There will be parties where kids (and even adults) bob for apples, tell fortunes, or go through haunted houses. There will be decorations of jack-o-lanterns, witches on brooms, and black cats. It is the only day of the year when we give free food to strangers and display carved vegetables on our front porches. . . .when you really think about it, October 31st is a very strange day . . .Where did we get this celebration called Halloween?



The Celtic Connection

Our modern celebration of Halloween is a VERY distant descendant of the ancient Celtic fire festival called *Samhain*. (The word is pronounced "sow-en" rhyming with cow, because "mh" in the middle of an Irish word has a "w" sound.) It was the biggest and most significant holiday of the Celtic year. The Celts (pronounced "Kelts") lived more than 2,000 years ago in what is now Great Britain, Ireland, and France. Their new year began on November 1.

Celtic legends tell us that on this night, all the hearth fires in Ireland were extinguished, and then re-lit from the central fire of the Druids at Tlachtga, 12 miles from the royal hill of Tara. (The Druids were the learned class among the Celts. They were religious priests who also acted as judges, lawmakers, poets, scholars, and scientists.) Upon this sacred bonfire the Druids burned animals and crops. The extinguishing of the hearth fires symbolized the "dark half" of the year. The re-kindling from the Druidic fire was symbolic of the returning life that was hoped for in the spring.

In the Celtic belief system, turning points, such as the time between one day and the next, the meeting of sea and shore, or the turning of one year into the next were seen as magical times. The turning of the year was the most potent of these times. This was the time when the "veil between the worlds" was at its thinnest, and the dead could communicate with the living.



The feast of *Samhain* is described by MacCane as order suspended. "During this interval the normal order of the universe is suspended, the barriers between the natural and the supernatural are temporarily removed, the *sidh* lies open and all divine beings and the spirits of the dead move freely among men and interfere sometimes violently, in their affairs" (*Celtic Mythology*, p. 127).

The Celts believed that when people died, they went to a land of eternal youth and happiness called Tir nan Og. They did not have the concept of heaven and hell that the Christian church later brought into the land. The dead were sometimes believed to be dwelling with the Fairy Folk, who lived in the numerous mounds or *sidhe* (pron. "shee") that dotted the Irish and Scottish countryside.

The Celts did not actually have demons and devils in their belief system. Some Christians describe Halloween as a festival in which the Celts sacrificed human beings to the devil or some evil demonic god of death. This is not accurate. The Celts did believe in gods, giants, monsters, witches, spirits, and elves, but these were not considered evil, so much as dangerous. The fairies, for example, were often considered hostile and menacing to humans because they were seen as being resentful of men taking over their lands. On this night of *Samhain*, the fairies would sometimes trick humans into becoming lost in the fairy mounds, where they would be trapped forever.

Folk tradition tells us of some divination practices associated with *Samhain*. Among the most common were divinations dealing with marriage, weather, and the coming fortunes for the year. These were performed via such methods as ducking for apples and apple peeling. Ducking for apples was a marriage divination. The first person to bite an apple would be the first to marry in the coming year -- like the modern toss of the wedding bouquet. Apple peeling was a divination to see how long your life would be. The longer the unbroken apple peel, the longer your life was destined to be. In Scotland, people would place stones or nuts in the ashes of the hearth before retiring for the night. Anyone whose stone had been disturbed during the night was said to be destined to die during the coming year.

Inaccurate Christian Teaching about Halloween

You will often read in the literature published by Christian organizations (such as the tracts and comic books from publisher Jack Chick) that, "Samhain was the Celtic God of the Dead, worshipped by the Druids with dreadful bloody sacrifices at Halloween." Chick embroiders this fantasy in a tract called "The Trick" and a full-sized comic book called "Spellbound?", shown here.

His writings describe evil Druids going from castle-door-to-door seeking virgin princesses to rape and sacrifice, leaving carved pumpkins illuminated by candles ("made from human fat!") for those who cooperated, and arranging demonic assassinations for those who refused to give them what they wanted. This, according to Mr. Chick, is supposed to be the "true" origin of trick or treating.



Let's look at a few historical facts (you can check out primary sources for this information in the [bibliography](#)):

- Contrary to information published by many Christian organizations, there is no historical or archeological evidence of any Celtic deity of the dead named "Samhain." We know the names of some 350 Celtic deities and *Samhain* isn't found among them. The Celtic gods of the dead were Gwynn ap Nudd for the British, and Arawn for the Welsh. The Irish did not have a "lord of death" as such. *McBain's Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* says that "samhuinn" (the Scots Gaelic spelling) means "summer's end." (See <http://www.ceantar.org/Dicts/MB2/mb32.html#samhuinn>)

It's not just Christian organizations that perpetuate this fallacy -- even the World Book encyclopedia (1990) writes about "Samhain, the Celtic lord of death" (World Book is in discussion with scholars in order to change this in future additions.) This idea is based on a fallacy that seems to have come from Col. Charles Vallency's books in the 1770s before the reliable translations of existing Celtic literary works and before archaeological excavations. (Col. Charles Vallency also tried to prove that the Irish were descended from the inhabitants of Armenia!) *Samhain* is the name of the holiday. There is no evidence of any god or demon named "Samhain," "Samain," "Sam Hane," or however you want to vary the spelling.

- Contrary to Christian criticism from many sources, Halloween did not originate as a Satanic festival, but was religious in nature (of course, the religion I am referring to is the Celtic faith of the ancient Druids rather than Christianity). This is an important distinction, for Halloween's association with Satanic worship is a modern phenomenon. The Celts didn't worship the devil (or any god of death) on Halloween.

It is important to distinguish between paganism and Satanism. Pagans are people who believe in more than one god. Some modern day pagans call themselves Wiccans. [For

more on Wicca and modern witchcraft see

http://www.exwitch.org/what_is_witchcraft.html] Pagans are quick to emphasize that they do not worship Satan or the devil. The devil is a Judeo-Christian concept, they say, because one has to believe in a single God to believe in God's opposite: "We do not accept the concept of 'absolute evil,' nor do we worship any entity known as 'Satan' or 'The Devil.'" (*Drawing Down the Moon*, pp. 103).

Celts were pagans, not Satanists. Of course, from a Christian standpoint both are in error. But to my mind there is a major difference between: (1) pagans (who have not heard the gospel) practicing a holiday containing fairies and elves and (2) Satanists (in rebellion against God) who sacrifice children to the devil. There is no original evidence to indicate that *Samhain* was any more Satanic than pagan harvest festivals of other religions, like the Romans or the Greeks.

- We have no evidence any where (from tradition, Celtic texts, or archaeology) that virgin princesses or any one else were being offered to the lord of death on Halloween.

There is general agreement that the Celts did in fact practice some form of human sacrifice or human execution, but this seems to have been limited to criminals, prisoners-of-war, or volunteers. (For more information on human sacrifice and the Druids see <http://www.featherlessbiped.com/halloween/hallows.htm>) We have no evidence that Druids practiced human sacrifice *on Halloween* (let alone sacrificed "virgin princesses").

- The pumpkin is a New World plant that never grew in Europe until modern times, so it couldn't have been used to make jack-o-lanterns by the Druids.
- There's zero evidence that the ancient Druids or their congregants ever dressed in costume or engaged in ritualized begging at harvest time. One Christian tract entitled *Trick or Treat* says:

The Druids went from house to house asking for a contribution to their demonic worship celebration. If a person didn't give, their trick was to kill him. The people feared the phrase "Trick or Treat."

This charge has been laid at the door step of the Celts so often that it's hard to believe there is no evidence for it, but there is absolutely none. Tad Tuleja (a folklore expert) writes:

An exhaustive Victorian survey of Irish calendar customs mentions divination games and apple bobbing as Halloween pastimes, but says nothing about food collection or a procession of "spirits."...On the question of masked begging at the Celtic New Year, authorities on the Druids do not say a word. (*Halloween and Other Festivals of Death and Life*, p. 83).

Where did costuming at Halloween come from? There is a lot of confusion on this point. But in spite of what you may have read in an encyclopedia or seen on the History Channel, I can find absolutely NO historical evidence of costumed begging among the Druids or as part of the Samhain festival.

We do have records of costumed processions in a much later time (Christian times), but these costumed processions were NOT limited to the Halloween holiday. They appear much more frequently at Christmas. The earliest actual historic practice seems to have been poor folk in masks and costumes going from house to house. They would put on a simple play or musical performance *in return for* food and drink. This practice is called mumming or guising and has no discernable connection to the Celts.

You may be surprised to learn that your parents or grandparents know nothing about costuming on Halloween. A reader sent me this email:

You mentioned in your article that the American custom came about in the 1930s as a reaction to vandalism. My parents were kids in New York City in those days, and I started looking for more info because of a comment my mom made on Halloween night. It seems that Halloween as we know it did not exist at the time--it was all pranks, as you mentioned (my mom mentioned taking gates off posts and moving outhouses, as you did, and my dad said that in the days of coal fuel there were big cans of ashes that the kids would tip over--a big mess).

The interesting part was that both of them said (Dad was born in 1924 and Mom in 1927) that each year as kids, they did go from door to door begging for food--but it was on Thanksgiving Day, not Halloween! My mom said that rather than "Trick or Treat!" their line at each door was "Anything for the poor? Anything for the poor?" They were given fruit, nuts, a cup of cider, or the occasional coin--that sort of thing.

This email is similar to conversations with my own father and mother (born 1928 and 1930 in western Pennsylvania), who told me that no one dressed in costumes or went door-to-door when they were children. There were lots of pranks on Halloween (some that make great stories for the grandchildren), but they know nothing of dressing up. So where did costuming come from? That's a big question mark. Folklorist Tad Tuleja says that costume parties are frequently mentioned in the early decades of the 1900s (but nothing about going door-to-door in costume). The costume parties themselves seem to be an attempt to involve children in disciplined "fun" as opposed to destructive "fun."

- The actual phrase "trick or treat" is not Druidic! The earliest known reference in print dates only to 1938 in an article in the Los Angeles Times entitled *Halloween Pranks Plotted by Youngsters of Southland*, Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles, California), October 30, 1938, p. A8: "'Trick or treat!' is the Halloween hijacking game hundreds of

Southern California youngsters will play tomorrow night as they practice streamlined versions of traditional Allhallows Eve pranks.” The phrase is not recorded by the Merriam-Webster Company until 1941. And the term is actually American, not European (*Halloween and Other Festivals of Death and Life*, p. 47, 86-90)!

It’s not only the phrase that is American, the practice is too! In America in the late 1800s and early 1900s, there was a custom of playing pranks on Halloween. This custom appears to have come from immigrants from Ireland and Scotland which had a practice called Mischief Night. Favorite pranks included tipping over outhouses and unhinging fence gates (Charles Panati, *Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Things*). The pleasant fiction was that such rambunctiousness was the work of "fairies," "elves," "witches" and "goblins" (*Halloween and Other Festivals of Death and Life*, p. 87). That's the "trick" part of Halloween.

Where did the "treat" part of Halloween come from? Jill Pederson Meyer writes:

"By the turn of the century, Halloween had become an ever more destructive way to “let off steam” for crowded and poor urban dwellers. As Stuart Schneider writes in 'Halloween in America' (1995), vandalism that had been limited to tipping outhouses; removing gates, soaping windows and switching shop signs, by the 1920’s had become nasty -- with real destruction of property and cruelty to animals and people. Perhaps not coincidentally, the disguised nighttime terrorism and murders by the Ku Klux Klan reached their apex during this decade. Schneider writes that neighborhood committees and local city clubs such as the Boy Scouts then mobilized to organize safe and fun alternatives to vandalism. School posters of the time call for a “Sane Halloween.” Good children were encouraged to go door to door and receive treats from homes and shop owners, thereby keeping troublemakers away. By the 1930’s, these “beggar’s nights” were enormously popular and being practiced nationwide, with the “trick or treat” greeting widespread from the late 1930s."

The Halloween begging activity known as trick-or-treat comes from America in the 1930s, not the British Isles. I’ve received confirmations of this from communication with people in the British Isles. They tell me that trick-or-treat is an American holiday! The custom was intended to control and displace disruptive pranks.

Every year, right around Halloween, we are treated to an outpouring of literature making false statements about the origins of Halloween. (In years past, I even helped distribute this type of literature to my congregation.) But my research on this subject has found that the Christian Halloween literature is vastly mistaken. Christians are guilty of spreading falsehood (perhaps out

of ignorance, but falsehood none the less). Believers do no service to God or to other Christians by creating very frightening fantasies masquerading as historical facts. Sloppy and improper scholarship makes Christians look deceitful. It also makes God appear deceptive to unbelievers.

What I am arguing for is accurate information, rather than falsehood. No, I'm not a "closet pagan." No, I'm not "a wolf in sheep's clothing." No, I haven't "bought into pagan propaganda." I'm a born-again, fundamentalist, Bible-believing, filled with the Spirit Christian (did I use enough labels?) trying to get at the historical truth.

At the Christian college I attended, I was taught that all truth was God's truth and that we don't need to fear truth -- whether it comes from secular, pagan, or Christian sources. Over a period of years I have been reading and talking with folklorists, historians, Christians, pagans, and people from Scotland and Ireland. The origins of Halloween are NOT what most Christian literature teaches. Sorry, no pumpkins with candles of human fat! Sorry, no human sacrifices by evil druids. Sorry, dressing up can't be historically connected to the Celts. Sorry, treat-or-treat is not a Satanist plot to captivate our children.

Halloween and the Middle Ages

What do Christians do with a holiday when pagans refuse to stop practicing it? This was the dilemma that faced Christians in the Middle Ages. (It is also the dilemma facing Christians today with 40 million children going door-to-door each Halloween.)

In 601 A.D. Pope Gregory the First issued a now famous edict to his missionaries concerning the native beliefs and customs of the peoples he hoped to convert. Rather than try to obliterate native peoples' customs and beliefs, the pope instructed his missionaries to use them: if a group of people worshipped a tree, rather than cut it down, he advised them to consecrate it to Christ and build a church around it.

In terms of quickly adding people to the Christian faith, this was a brilliant concept and it became a basic approach used in Catholic missionary work. In many cases, church holy days were purposely set to coincide with native holy days. Christmas, for instance, was assigned the arbitrary date of December 25th because it corresponded with the mid-winter celebration of many peoples.

In 835 Pope Gregory IV decided to move the practice of All Saints' Day to November 1. This was possibly done to correspond with the Celtic practice of *Samhain*. The Mass that was said on this day was called *Allhallowmas* ("the mass of all the holy ones"). The evening before All Saints' Day became known as *All Hallow e'en* ("the evening of all the holy ones"). So you see the name "Halloween" is actually Christian, not pagan. It is derived from All Saints Day.

The old beliefs associated with *Samhain* never died out entirely. The powerful symbolism of fairies, elves, and the traveling dead had a strong tie with the people and they were not satisfied with the new Catholic feast honoring dead saints. When people continued some of the beliefs and practices associated with *Samhain*, the church increased the rhetoric against *Samhain*. They branded the earlier religion's practices as evil, and began to associate them with the devil. As

representatives of the rival religion, Druids were considered malevolent worshippers of devilish or demonic gods and spirits. Celtic belief in supernatural creatures (like elves and fairies) persisted, while the church made attempts to define them as being no longer merely mischievous, but wicked. People continued to celebrate All Hallows Eve as a time of the wandering dead, but the supernatural beings were now thought to be Satanic.

How did witches become connected to Halloween? Once the Druids were branded as evil by the church, their practices were looked at as "witchcraft." Followers of the old religion were persecuted, went into hiding, and were branded as witches who worshipped Satan. This is why European witchcraft became connected with Satan, whereas witchcraft in other areas of the world is animistic in nature. October 31 became known as a witch holiday. It was called "The Witches' Sabbath" by witch hunters and eventually European witches began celebrating October 31 as one of their four great Sabbaths held during the year.

Of course, in some ways from a Christian standpoint the church's response makes sense. Doesn't the Bible view the worship of other gods as deception by demons (1 Corinthians 10:18-22)? Yes, but the Bible also says that Satan often preaches in Christian churches (2 Corinthians 11:13-14). Pagans don't have a monopoly on evil, demonic deception, or harmful practices. As a Christian (in spite of a good, pure, and holy God) I often do evil things and fall into deception. Christians can also do very hurtful things in the name of Christ. (Some of the worst hate mail that I get comes from Christians who don't agree with me about baptism or giving or eternal security or grace or Halloween.)

I'm not sure that anything is gained by calling pagans, "Satanists" or "demon worshippers." It's easy to view yourself as God's agent and to brand people with strong labels. Then you can justify not relating to them in grace. You can begin to hate and fear them. And eventually you can persuade yourself that as agents of Satan they deserve persecution (i.e. the inquisition and witch burnings). This goes against everything that Jesus taught about reaching out to pagans (1 Corinthians 5:9-13) and loving our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48), and showing mercy to them (Luke 6:27-36). The truth is that sometimes Christians end up acting more like Satan, than pagans do.

Once the practice of *Samhain* was viewed as not merely wrong, but "trafficking with Satan," it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Practitioners of the old religion began associating medieval Satanic elements with Halloween. You can see this association in many symbols and traditions of Halloween. Want to hold a Halloween party? Be sure to use black and red crepe - the devil's colors according to Medieval superstition... Decorate with a large spider - one of the devil's followers... And don't forget the black cat. Christians during the Middle Ages believed that every witch had a personal demon sent by Satan who gave them their powers. This personal demon was called a *familiar*. The familiars, which lived with their witches, usually existed in the form of some animal -- often a black cat. This is a superstitious practice of medieval Christians, however, and should not be attributed to the ancient Celts. (Domestic cats



were apparently not introduced to Northern Europe until post-Julius Caesar, and didn't really "catch on" until after AD 1050.)



How about the jack-o'-lantern? People in England and Ireland carved out beets, potatoes, and turnips to use as lanterns (not just on Halloween). The hollowing out of a turnip to serve as a makeshift lantern was simply a clever way to solve a technical problem in the absence of available metal. According to an 18th century Irish legend, jack-o'-lanterns were named for a man named Jack, who could not enter heaven because he was a miser. He could not enter hell either, because he had played jokes on the devil. Hence, Jack is a damned soul doomed to wander in darkness until Judgment Day. This legend is recent and does NOT go back to ancient times. If it was ancient, we would find it in literature, the Christian art of Western Europe, pagan carvings, or somewhere in graphic representations. It is notable by its absence. After this legend reached America, pumpkins began to be used, rather than turnips, to represent Jack's lantern. The purpose of the lantern was to ward off evil, not participate in it!

The Present Day Celebration of Halloween

Halloween celebrations (of any kind or form) did not become popular in the United States until the late 1800s. It appears to have arrived after 1840, when large numbers of immigrants arrived from Ireland and Scotland and introduced elements like Mischief Night, beliefs about elves and fairies, and practices such as jack-o'-lanterns. (Many of the Halloween customs that they brought to America probably did not enter Irish and Scottish culture until after 1750.) The practice does not come from ancient times, but modern. It must be said that "Halloween" as we know it in America, with all the folk stories and urban legends attached to it, is a distinctly American phenomenon, with the "Trick or Treat" bits occurring after 1930.

Halloween is celebrated in many countries today, but this is actually a result of secular American influence:

...the trick-or-treat and masking customs on 31 October in England and Finland have been introduced from the United States and Canada (*Halloween and Other Festivals of Death*, p. 162).

Does anyone today celebrate the Celtic holiday of Samhain as a religious observance? Yes. During the mid-1900's, a new interest in pagan religion occurred in Europe and the United States. As a result, paganism as an organized religion has attracted large numbers of people. Many followers of various pagan religions, such as Druids and Wiccans observe Samhain as a religious festival. They view it as a memorial day for their dead friends, similar to the United States' national holiday of Memorial Day in May.

Modern pagans (and non-Satanic witches) would vehemently deny that their celebration has anything to do with the demonic horrors depicted in such films as Friday the 13th. To them, Halloween is one of the four greater Sabbats (holidays) held during the year. Halloween for them is a time of "harvest celebration. It is a time of ritual, a time for ridding oneself of personal weaknesses, a time for feasting and joyful celebration. It is also a time for communing with the

spirits of the dead. It is still a night to practice various forms of divination concerning future events."

Is Halloween connected to Satanism? Contrary to popular belief Halloween is not the most important celebration for Satanists. Most Satanists celebrate their own birthdays as their most important "unholi"-day, which is to be expected from adherents of a religion who believe that the highest form of religion is "worship of self" (The Satanic Bible, Anton LaVey). Some of the stories of satanic ritual abuse that are passed around in Christian circles have no basis in fact (like those found in Rebecca Brown's book "He Came to Set the Captives Free"). According to Christian researchers Bob and Gretchen Passantino (see the well-researched book entitled *Satanism* by Bob and Gretchen Passantino, Zondervan, 1995):

"The actual incidence level of satanic-associated crime is very low, and on Halloween consists mostly of petty vandalism and desecration of graveyards and churches; satanic graffiti; raucous rituals including drug and/or alcohol use and sexual promiscuity; and very rarely sexual violence or animal killing. The most well-known documented criminal activity associated with Halloween are the "Devil's Night" fires that were rampant in the Detroit area. These destructive bonfires were not religiously inspired, but were a convenient excuse for out-of-control juveniles to act destructively, often in their own communities.

It is not true that satanists look for "Christian virgins" to rape during Halloween rituals. A young Christian is much more likely to be in danger of a drunk driver, or a party that gets out of hand with drug or alcohol use than of satanic abduction. Occasional anti-social, criminally committed individuals or small groups that also practice self-styled satanism commit crimes on Halloween, but they invariably betray a pattern of sociopathy at other times as well.

It is not true that poisoning or sabotaging of Halloween treats is a significant risk if parents take sensible precautions. Most horror stories are unsubstantiated rumors that quickly cross the country, gaining embellishments, and unnecessarily frightening parents. If parents are careful about restricting their children's treats to ones from people they know and trust, or from a formal program run by a church, community group, or merchant association, they should be fairly safe. In many communities, local hospitals and/or police stations will screen treats free of charge."

How should Christians react to Halloween?

- "Halloween is the most dangerous day of the year -- when Satanists and witches snatch children off the streets and sacrifice them in Satan's name!"
- "We don't worship other gods or honor the dead on Halloween. Halloween is nothing but a secular time of fun and games -- an excuse for the kids to dress up and overload on sugar!"
- "I love to see the children, out in the neighborhood streets with their parents, dressed in funny clothing, having a wonderful time and mocking the Devil with laughter."

These are three examples of very different Christian reactions to Halloween. Allow me to offer some opinions.

1. Occult and Satanic Elements:

Deuteronomy 18:11 says: *"There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, one who calls up the dead."*

One of the present realities we must be aware of is that in recent decades, pagan, cultic groups, and some Satanists have claimed Halloween as a "holy day." As Christians we must avoid any action forbidden by our Lord. We should never seek to know the future through horoscopes, divination, or astrology. We should not seek to talk to or call up the dead (necromancy). We should not pray to other gods. We should not seek "power" over other people by the use of spells or supernatural forces. The practice of pagan witchcraft is specifically prohibited in both the Old and New Testaments (Leviticus 19:31; Acts 19:18-20; Galatians 5:19-21; Revelation 22:15). Witchcraft (whether pagan or Satanic) is dangerous and harmful. We are to submit to God and resist the devil; not form alliances with him (James 4:7). The Bible certainly makes it clear that we should not participate with pagans in speaking to the dead on October 31 (or any other day)!



2. Non-Satanic elements:

Although some devil worshippers have adopted Halloween as their "holiday," the day itself did not grow out of Satanic practices. Halloween has some weak connections to Celts celebrating a new year, but most of present day Halloween customs are neither pagan, nor Satanic. Here is a table of practices and dates as they are connected with Halloween:

| | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------------|
| practice | divination | necromancy | black cats, spiders | tricks & pranks | costuming | pumpkin carving | trick or treat | slasher movies |
| earliest date | ancient | ? | Middle Ages | ? | early 1900s(?) | after 1750s | 1930s | 1950s |
| source | pagan Celts | Celts or Medieval witchcraft | Medieval superstition | Irish Mischief Night | ? | Irish | Boy Scouts & others | Hollywood |
| original intent | pagan religious practice | pagan religious practice | fear & easy labels | "those nasty fairies" | to stop pranks(?) | ward off evil | to stop pranks | make money |
| Biblically forbidden | yes | yes | no | if destructive | no | no | no | yes - Phil 4:8 |

Most holidays (even Christmas and Easter) contain evil, neutral, and good elements as part of their celebration. Christians must discern one from the other and make decisions that glorify God and cause no harm to their personal walk with Christ. Christians seem to have no trouble making these distinctions about Christmas, but we utterly fail to do the necessary thinking when it comes to Halloween. In my opinion, present day Halloween has some evil elements (divination rituals, communication with spirits), some neutral elements (sorry, costumes didn't come from evil Druids involved in human sacrifice), and some good elements (asking for candy was an attempt by the Boy Scouts of America to calm the abuse of the holiday!).

As W.J. Bethancourt III says: "Each Christian must decide for themselves whether dressing up in funny clothes and asking for candy from the neighbors is 'satanic' and 'necromancing' or not. Allowing your children to dress up as mass-murderers and as villains from the Hollywood slasher movies may or may not be 'satanic,' but it certainly is stupid. Making such creatures objects of 'hero-worship' might not be giving the kind of message to a child that necessarily enables them to become sober, productive adults."

Costuming children as ballerinas or cartoon characters or Bible heroes seems far removed from Satanism or any practice of paganism.

What I have tried to show is that much of the association with witchcraft and Satanic elements has actually come from Christian misinformation attempting to "demonize" this holiday. There is no evidence that the original Celtic celebration was Satanic. Much of the information on Halloween that Christians preach and write about is plainly based on shoddy research.

While Christians should absolutely avoid pagan practices, Christian hype tends to make us overreact to benign folk elements of Halloween. We appear like zany buffoons to the world

when there is no necessity for doing so. Furthermore, our groundless retreat from all elements of Halloween leaves a vacuum that wicked elements delight to fill.

October 31st is only a day on the calendar. Halloween, like any other day, is only as evil as one cares to make it.



10-29-2004

AHA ... THAT PUMPKIN CONFIRMS YOUR SUPPORT OF HALLOWEEN AND, ERGO, YOUR IDENTITY AS A NEFARIOUS, PAGAN, DEVIL-WORSHIPPER!

3. Alternative Celebrations:

I would also suggest using the holiday to be involved in the joy and celebration of All Saints' Day, thanksgiving for harvest, and the celebration of the Reformation of the Church. Here are two tracts which offer alternatives to the traditional American celebration of Halloween:

Tract 1:

One successful alternative used by a number of churches is a "Faith Festival" in which children dress as their favorite Bible character and gather for a special children's service with puppets, a Christian film, or something special. This offers an ideal opportunity to explain the spiritual significance of Halloween and to encourage the children to remember Hebrews chapter 11, which features great men and women of faith who have gone before us. The "Faith Festival" can be a time to thank God for His many blessings.

Tract 2:

As believers, we can take this opportunity to provide a creative alternative to this celebration. In ancient Israel, the majority of Jewish festivals occurred at the same time as pagan festivals. God did not simply tell his people not to engage in pagan festivals, He provided an alternative. During every major pagan festival, the Hebrew people would take part in a God-given alternative, a festival celebrating the same general subject but with a completely different focus.

There are many wholesome alternatives for our children: a church Bible costume party, Reformation Day church service, holding a harvest celebration like the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles.

4. Being Positive Without Fear:

Regardless of the position you take regarding your family's response to Halloween, if you are concerned about the evil associations with Halloween, you can rejoice that you can "resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7) and that through the cross Christ has "disarmed principalities and powers," and "made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them" (Colossians 2:15).

I would certainly suggest using the holiday to teach our children about the triumph in Christ of God over evil. This should not be a night that we hide from in fear, but a night (like every night) when a Christian can stand confident in victory, because the One who lives in us is greater, than the one who lives in the world (1 John 4:4). "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them!" (1 John 4:4).

Holding oneself apart from the world is perhaps a good thing, but sometimes this is just an excuse for being afraid. We are reminded to be "in the world" and "sent to the world", as well as being "not of the world" (John 17:15-18). There are very few times when strangers actually come

to your door and ask you to give them something! Our family has used Halloween to hand out Christian tapes to everyone that has come-a-begging! Some Christian children use "trick or treating" by giving a tract in return for the candy they receive at each house. What a wonderful way to spread the gospel! A smile, some candy, a tract and a "God bless you!" will save more souls than hiding in your house with the porch light off.

As a believer in Jesus Christ and thus a child of God, I personally do not give much honor to the celebration of Halloween, but our family does participate in some of the neutral elements of Halloween and we use Halloween to reach people who don't know Jesus. We also use Halloween to celebrate the victory that I and other saints have over the wickedness of this world.

A good general principle should be to refrain from participating in anything that compromises your faith or brings dishonor to Jesus Christ. Another good principle is to look for ways to become a positive, Christ-proclaiming voice in the midst of a secular and pagan world. Each Christian must be persuaded in his own conscience about how they approach Halloween.

Why Did I Write This Article?

What I'm arguing for is:

- (1) Accurate information, rather than falsehood.
- (2) A little bit of tolerance toward Christians who choose to participate in "harmless" Halloween activities that have no connection to paganism (like pumpkins, dressing up, or treat-or-treat).
- (3) For the Christian community to think about how it is going to handle Halloween -- because it is not going to go away. It is more popular than ever. We can redeem it for Christ or we can use fear and scare tactics to hide our light under a basket (Matthew 5:15).

I think we find a close parallel in Christmas. Christmas wasn't celebrated by the early church until the fourth century. In that century, the church decided to try to redeem a Roman pagan winter solstice festival (the birthday of the unconquered sun). Sometime before 336 the Church in Rome, unable to stamp out this pagan festival, spiritualized it as the "Feast of the Nativity of the Sun of Righteousness." In some ways, I think Christians have succeeded in giving December 25 a new meaning.

I really think Pope Gregory had the right idea. Take pagan holidays and assign Christian events or practices to them and redeem them for Christ. Christians have as much right as any other group to lay claim to a day on the calendar (Romans 14:6). What's the alternative? The alternative is to let pagans, devil worshippers, or Hollywood producers put their stamp on October 31. At the very least, this will mean a day given over to the celebration of (what the Bible calls) superstitions, false gods and goddesses. At its worst, Halloween becomes a Mardi gras of the grotesque, of destruction, of wickedness, and of death, because we weren't being a preservative for good (Matthew 5:13).