

Witches and Goblins and Ghosts, Oh, My!

Halloween (or, more properly, Hallowe'en or All Hallow's Eve) is perhaps the perfect twenty-first century American holiday. A melting pot of traditions from other cultures, belief systems, urban legends, and misinformation, Halloween, like America, is simultaneously praised and vilified. This is the fourth in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* series on holidays. Previous installments have been Thanksgiving (*ET&N* 18), Christmas (21), and Easter: Pascha or Eostre? (32). The purpose of the series is to investigate these special days in light of Scripture and church history. Additional installments of this series will include Mardi Gras, Pentecost, Palm Sunday, and St. Patrick's Day. In this issue of *ET&N*, we look at the Great Halloween Debate and conclude with some suggestions for those who follow Jesus.

Then

Church

Halloween has no root in the New Testament, but part of it is an outgrowth of practices that emerged within the first few centuries of the church, when persecution and martyrdom were relatively common. While I am mindful of Jesus' comment to *"Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead"* (Matthew 8:22), it is nevertheless valuable to stop from time to time and honor those who laid the path for Christianity, just as we do for our war dead on the Veterans' Day that is approaching. In a very real sense, the church aspects of Halloween grew out of just such a desire to remember and honor those who came before.

Feasts honoring specific martyrs emerged very early in individual churches throughout the Roman world. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, for example, there is evidence of special observances in Antioch, Edessa and Syria by the early fourth century. With the cloud of martyrs growing, particularly during the Diocletian persecution in 303-304, it rapidly became impractical to honor each martyr separately, so a common commemoration began to emerge, most often on May 13. On that date in 609, Boniface IV dedicated the former Pantheon in Rome to "St. Mary and All Martyrs," more formally establishing the tradition. The move to November 1 occurred over time with the final move apparently established by Gregory IV (827-844) when he dedicated a chapel in St. Peter's to all saints.

It is apparent therefore that the evolution of All Saints' Day occurred entirely independent of any pagan celebrations. All Saint's Day is a Christian holiday, one every bit as appropriate as Veterans' Day. One may wish to disassociate it with the accompanying Roman Catholic ritualization that followed but that does not eliminate the value of honoring those who paid for their faith with their lives.

Paganism

Early human society was primarily agrarian, and cultural events naturally emerged that coincided and recognized the cycles of the growing season. One such event with particular significance to many of the customs of Halloween was the Celtic holiday known as Samhain (saw-wen), which simply means "summer's end." Much of the Samhain practices centered on end-of-season tasks. Crops were gathered and prepared for winter storage, animals were brought in from pastures - those deemed unlikely to survive the winter slaughtered to add to food stock. Thanks were given to the gods for the harvest, and the size of the winter food stock was evaluated. These were natural, even essential, tasks in an agrarian society.

Samhain evolved at a time when God had not fully revealed Himself to the Celtic people - before the incarnation of Christ brought reconciliation to all people, when Israel remained God's chosen people without any particular obligation to share that relationship with others. Nevertheless, these people had a God-given sense of the divine and the eternal (Ecclesiastes 3:11) and understood that their world was controlled by something more powerful than themselves. That they, like all ancient peoples, invented false gods to fill the void should not be held against them in the least. The alternative was to think, like many modern people do, that the entire universe is some colossal cosmic accident.

Man being man, some sacramentalized these beliefs, creating elaborate rituals surrounding the routine tasks of life. For the Celts, a priestly class known as the Druids emerged. All societies have recognized the value of such "medicine men," who attempt to mediate between the common people and the spiritual world. This is precisely the kind of structured intermediary system God established with Israel through the Law. God did not choose the Celts; He chose Israel. The practices of the Druids are cloaked in mystery for the most part because their rites were secret. There is, however, no reliable evidence that Druids performed human sacrifice. The sole source of that probable misconception comes from Julius Caesar - a pagan himself - who made the claim in his *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*. Since, Caesar built the reputation that carried him to the Roman imperium primarily on his conquest of the British Isles, it's easy to view his comments as wartime propaganda similar to Hollywood World War II movies demonizing Germans and Japanese. Such things may sometimes be justifiable in a war environment, but they hardly serve as reliable history.

Another aspect of Samhain revolves around Celtic spirituality and gives rise to the holiday's bad rep. The Celts believed the boundary between the supernatural and the temporal was thin and particularly so on this day. On this darkest of nights, midway between the Fall equinox and the winter solstice, they believed they could contact their dead loved ones and that those loved ones, inhabited the parallel world where past, present and future merged, could provide the guidance they needed to deal with this existence. Don't we Christians believe that our loved ones who have died in Christ live on? Ultimately, the religious aspects of Samhain had to do with community, as the villages prepared feasts for the returning dead. Young men might canvas the homes, knocking on doors to solicit contributions to the feast. Various divination games were played, including one using apple skins cut from bobbed apples.

Divination is the attempt to discern the future through spiritual beings. It was resoundingly prohibited in the Mosaic Law (Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 19:26, 31; 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:10-11), but that applied specifically only to God's people.

Neither Exodus 22:18 or Leviticus 20:27 called for or authorized witch hunts in the broader world. Furthermore, God differentiates between these superstitions that make their appeal to "familiar" spirits and those that He ordained. There are many scriptural instances of divination; for example:

- By lot: division of Canaan (Numbers 26:55-56); Achan's guilt was exposed (Joshua 7:14-19); Saul was elected king (1 Samuel 10:20-21); and Matthias was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:21-26).
- By dreams: Joseph (Genesis 41:25-32 et al); Daniel (Daniel 4:19-28 et al); Gideon and the Midianites (Judges 7:12-15); Joseph's flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:12-13)
- The Urim and Thummim (Exodus 28:29-31).

How many of us claim to seek guidance from God for our lives? Divination is not inherently evil. It's a matter of in whom one puts one's faith and seeks the answers.



Catholicism

On the way to our church building this past Sunday morning, I heard part of an interview with a Catholic priest who commented, among other things, that our prayers for our deceased loved ones can help them *and* that their prayers help us. Of course, we may choose to dismiss such pronouncements as Catholic superstition, but Christian doctrine teaches that the redeemed are resurrected. Who is to say what communion they can have with the living?

At any rate, All Saints' Day (and All Souls' Day which follows on November 2) are considered holy days of obligation, apparently requiring Catholics to attend Mass and refrain from servile work so that they can devote themselves to prayer.

October 31 is also the anniversary on another significant event in Christian history. On that day in 1517, a minor cleric named Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. While it was not necessarily his intent, his action that day is considered the opening of the Reformation, from which Lutheran, Reformed and Anabaptist movements grew. Most Lutheran Churches honor Luther (now on the Sunday preceding October 31) at least by singing his majestic hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, and many Reformed churches follow suit.

Wicca

In 2004, the superintendent of the Payallup (WA) public schools announced the suspension of all Halloween-related activities in the district. The reports read like some kind of lampoon or internet spoof both because of the superintendent's ironic name - Tony Apostle - and one of his alleged reasons for the decision. According to Karen Hansen, school district spokesperson (as quoted at the KOMO television website), "Witches with pointy noses and things like that are not respectful symbols of the Wiccan religion and so we want to be respectful of that."

Unless you consider all non-Christian religions to be motivated by Satan, Wicca is not

a Satanist religion. It is neopaganist nature worship run amok, and while many Wiccans apparently enjoy Halloween, it is not a Wicca holiday and modern witches generally do not practice secret rites on the day. Most merely enjoy it as the secular holiday it is. Some do, on the other hand, attempt to reconstruct ancient Samhain practices, including divination. They do not, however, consider that the veil between the spiritual and physical worlds is thinnest on October 31.

Satanists

The suggestion that Halloween is a Satanist holiday is the invention of fundamental Christians in the nineteenth century. Dozens of anti-Halloween Christian webpages confidently claim that Satan loves Halloween. Perhaps he does, but if so, probably no more than the modern secular versions of Christmas and Easter. Modern Satanists are not devil-worshippers - they're too consumed with self-worship and most don't even believe Satan really exists anyway. To most of them, Satan is just an archetype of a powerful, self-confident individual in total control of himself and able to succeed through personal effort. Some have taken up the Christian suggestion that Halloween is their holiday, but if you go out and read modern Satanist literature on the web (as I did), you'll discover the revealing fact that their principal holiday is their individual birthdays. They typically bill themselves as tolerant, respectful humanists.

As avowed individuals, many don't join any Halloween celebrations. They don't sacrifice children on an altar. At worst, they're likely to attend a group party.

Fundamentalists

The response of radical fundamentalists can best be characterized as hysterical, littered with historical and other factual errors about the roots of Halloween, as well as the practices of modern-day Wiccans and Satanists. These are sadly misguided people who need our love and patience, not our vitriolic condemnation. Wiccans make the mistake of worshiping the creation instead of the Creator, while Satanists worship themselves. If their numbers are growing, as some reports suggest, perhaps we Christians would do well to look in a mirror. Are our attacks reflective of He we claim to serve?

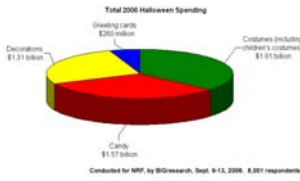
Most reprehensible of all are the "Hell Houses" that have arisen in the past decade or so. These pseudo-haunted houses, with their grotesque images and presumptuous judgments are the invention of misanthropes who are the antithesis of Christ Jesus. Hell Houses are designed to "scare the hell out of children," and promoters claim substantial spot-conversions of attendees. Show me one example in Scripture of anyone converted to Christ through such fear and intimidation tactics. Those who are, sadly, are likely to either fall away quickly or become carbon copies of their creators. As I've stated before, the Bible does not call on Christians to judge non-believers - only to love them in such a way as they will see Christ in us and be drawn to God's call. On the other hand, we are called to judge the sins of our brothers and sisters! You can learn more about Hell Houses at either of these links:

Christianity Today article October 7, 1996 -

www.ctlibrary.com/ct/1996/october7/6tb87a.html

Charisma News reprint c 2005 - beliefnet.com/story/116/story_11618_1.html

Commercialism



Every year, the National Retail Federation (NRF) conducts a survey about Halloween behaviors. In this year's report, the NRF gleefully reported, "consumers are expected to spend \$4.96 billion this Halloween, up significantly from just \$3.29 billion a year ago." This just goes to show that while the tradition Halloween colors may be orange and black, the real color today is green. We may rightly

complain about the crass commercialization associated with Halloween, but the NRF reports that Halloween trails Christmas (what they refer to as "Winter Holidays," Valentine's Day, Easter (curiously, no euphemistic "Spring Holidays" here), Mothers' Day, and (even!) Fathers' Day. [Note: click the graph at left for 2006 Halloween Spending image.]

Conclusion and Prescription

Many Christian webpages insist that Christians have nothing whatsoever to do with Halloween. Some even harshly criticize churches that conduct alternative activities, such as "Harvest Parties," as our church has the past couple of years. There are several problems with abandoning Halloween.

First, it does not serve Christianity to give up ground. Despite its association with Samhain, Halloween has ancient Christian roots that serve the admirable purpose of setting aside one day a year to honor our Christian predecessors. We should not surrender such a practice to non-believers.

Second, in our fractured American society, Halloween can serve as a community-builder. As I thought about it in studying for this installment of *ET&N*, some of my most vivid childhood memories are of dressing up as an Admiral (using an old Navy uniform given to my Dad by Hyman Rickover), a cowboy, or a hobo. Going from house-to-house, seeing the delighted looks on the faces of our neighbors, gathering some treats I could horde until Christmas, and comparing "hauls" with my brothers are all treasured memories. Perhaps things were different in the 50's and 60's, but do we have to surrender? Properly and carefully observed, our traditional American Halloween traditions can serve to connect otherwise fractured neighborhoods.

Third, there were some superstitious elements of Samhain, but it was primarily a harvest festival combined with remembering and honoring departed loved ones. Celebrating and thanking God for the bounty He provides us should be a daily task, of course, but can't we use this day to focus even more attention on God's loving provision. And few Christians have any problem remembering and honoring veterans of wars. Why should we have any problem remembering and honoring veterans of spiritual battles?

Fourth, whatever appeal the dark side of Halloween may have to some, it pales in comparison to more ubiquitous images in our society. IN many ways, New Year's Eve, when the roads are filled with drunken partiers, is more dangerous than Halloween. The typical television commercial for bras, beer, or jeans is more seductive than any Halloween custom. We need to fight back in love - not surrender in fear, which is ultimately what the attacks on Halloween reveal. We fear that the supposed satanic messages of Halloween are more powerful than anything God can

do.

Fifth, perhaps we could get over ourselves and find a sense of humor. I'm not going to suggest that Jesus would have gone trick-or-treating, but were He alive today and costumed children appeared at His doorstep, can you imagine that He would revile them with stories of hell? If we're responsible parents, we can explain the negative sides of Halloween without denying them the fun.

Lastly - and most important - radical fundamentalists and other misguided Christians suggest that Halloween promotes the power of God's enemy, but there's good news. Ultimately, those powers - real as they are and troublesome though they may sometimes be - are powerless. The war is over. It ended on the cross when Christ died to remove Satan's power. He remains only a pathetic, self-indulgent shell. He has only that power that we choose to give him.

So here are my suggestions, some of which I cannot implement with my own children, but perhaps I can with my new grandson if my daughter and her husband agree. I offer these while fully cognizant of Paul's command to "*abstain from very form of evil*" (1 Thessalonians 5:22)*. We can readily participate in many aspects of Halloween while still following that command.

1. Let children dress up in homemade costumes and go treat-or-treating with parents in their own neighborhood. Perhaps we might actually learn our neighbors' names and develop the seeds of a relationship that would allow us to share Christ when the time is right. They won't be interested in interacting with us if we're busy vilifying their behavior. We might even form a neighborhood group before Halloween to discuss ways to ensure safety and fun.
2. Hold Halloween parties where we uphold the ancient human tradition of gratitude for the harvest. Celts may have attributed that to pagan gods and goddesses, but we know who's really responsible and can give the appropriate attribution.
3. Hold a prayer vigil to thank God for the courageous men and women who paid the ultimate price for their faith. While not wanting to dwell upon death, we can tell the stories of people like Stephen, Perpetua, Polycarp, and Blandina to our children without being morbid. By learning that others died so that we would have the opportunity to know Christ, they can develop genuine gratitude for the freedoms we experience today.
4. Completely avoid participating in any pagan practices, such as divination games. When my daughter was little, a friend brought out a Ouija Board. Knowing nothing about it, my daughter participated and was terrified by the results. Delving into such superstitious practices is dangerous, but we need to tell our children why.
5. Glorify God in everything we do on Halloween rather than retreating to the closet or offending everyone around us. Jesus was so effective with people because He was among them. At a wedding, for example, where everyone drank (gasp!) wine.
6. Oppose misguided efforts like Hell Houses and tracts in trick-or-treat bags. Such tactics only serve to reinforce the world's negative attitudes toward Christians.

Postscript: while I welcome comments on the blog, please don't send my regurgitations of the same old anti-Halloween arguments--particularly the urban legends about razor-laced apples and the like. There's enough of that junk on the web already, and I won't approve messages that perpetrate more misinformation. I haven't hit on every aspect of Halloween ("mischief night," for example), so if you want to raise those issues, I'll be happy to post them and respond.

* Footnote: The King James Version (KJV) of the Bible contains a mistranslation of this verse that, despite the fact that it is corrected in almost every modern translation (NIV, NASB, RSV). See this article for a complete discussion. Practically, it is impossible to avoid any "appearance of evil."

Discussion [\(Creation: Scripture and Science\)](#)

Comments posted on the [ET&N](#) blog at blog.peculiarpress.com | Note: I have removed the requirement that e-mail addresses be included with posts, so you can comment without fear of spam.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, respond so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Neos and Kainos (Nov 14)

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