
Christians and Halloween – How Do We Respond?

To many people brought up on the modern horror diet of Nightmare on Elm Street and Poltergeist, Halloween is par for the course, cool, and even fun. Dressing up in ghoulish costumes, going around the neighbourhood to trick-or-treat and sharing horror stories on October 31 of every year is considered harmless fun, a time to let one's hair down.

However, as Christians, we should be aware that Halloween has pagan roots. For the ancient Celts – the predecessors of the Welsh, Scottish and Irish peoples – October 31 was the first day of the new year called Samhain. According to the Irish sagas, which were penned sometime between the 9th and 12th centuries, Samhain was the day that many mundane chores were done: crops were harvested and farmsteads secured. October 31 also marked the end of fall and the start of winter, which was a time of increasing darkness, death of vegetation and the harvest; all this contributed to the symbolism of the day, and in turn, its power.¹

Akin to the Hungry Ghost Month celebrated across Asia and in Singapore, Samhain was a day in which the connection between the physical realm and the netherworld was open. It is worth quoting Jack Santino from the Washington-based Smithsonian Institute at length here:

It was believed that at the time of transition to the new year, the souls of those who had died during the year assembled, and the living lit bonfires and sacrificed fruits and vegetables in their honor to expiate their sins. The souls of the dead were allowed passage to the land of the just. On the eve of Samhain, then, spirits were a'traveling. Since the day was a bridge between one year and the next, **the barrier between the world of men and the world of spirits was also bridged [emphasis mine].**²

¹ Jack Santino, 'Halloween in America: Contemporary Customs and Performances,' *Western Folklore*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Jan., 1983), pp. 5-6

² Santino 1983, p6

One legend has it that the spirits of all those who had died throughout the year would come back in search of living bodies to possess for the next year. It was also the day that the living were able to communicate with the dead.³ Tom Sanuinet, a former high priest of Wicca, notes that trick-or-treating is essentially a representation of ancient human sacrifice and symbolic of sacrificing to gods. In other words, participation in such a practice is tantamount to idol worship.⁴

Faced with a festival with such pagan connections, there are conceivably three responses that Christians can arrive at:

- (1) Participate in such a festival;
- (2) Stay aloof in a neutral position, such as dressing up children as fairies for trick-or-treats;
- (3) Renounce Halloween as inherently evil and reject it.

The first response can be rejected outright, the second somewhat condoned. According to the Bible, however, the rules are clear. We are to avoid any paganistic practices, in particular those pertaining to divination. God's instructions to Israel were clear:

There shall not be found among you *anyone* who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, *or one* who practices witchcraft, *or* a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things *are* an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you. (Deut 18:10-12, NKJV)

In other words, Christians should reject the pagan roots of Halloween. By extension, we should not participate in the outward manifestations of such a festival.

Understandably, there may be a place for redeeming Halloween. According to Travis Allen, the director of Internet Ministry at Grace to You, Christians in the United States have opted for Halloween alternatives called "Harvest Festivals,"

³ Roger Boehm, *Evil Defined – From a Christian Perspective*, Titusville, Roger Boehm, 2006, p 103

⁴ Cited in Eddie and Alice Smith, *Spiritual House Cleaning: Protect Your Home and Family from Spiritual Pollution*, Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 2003, p 64

“Reformation Festivals,” glory festivals and prayer vigils.⁵ During such festivals, children dress up as farmers, Bible characters, or Reformation heroes. These festivals could be an effective means of reaching out to neighborhood families with the gospel.

As Christians, we need to ask for wisdom if for some reason we wanted to redeem Halloween. On one hand, it’s easy to say let’s have fun; but we need wisdom from God as to how to conduct ourselves during such a spiritual time. It is also easy to look for demons under every bush when they are not always there. In the end, we need to stand out as light of the world and salt of the earth.

There should be a note of caution here, however. Previous attempts to “Christianise” and redeem Halloween have not been successful. The Catholic Church assigned the Feast of All Saints to November 1 in an attempt to substitute it for Samhain. The day was set aside in honor of Christian saints and martyrs, especially those that did not otherwise have a special day devoted to them.⁶ In fact, the name “Halloween” was a result of this Feast of All Saints celebration. “All Hallows Eve,” the evening before All Saints Day, began the time of remembrance. “All Hallows Eve” was eventually contracted to “Hallow-e’en,” which became “Halloween.”⁷ Nevertheless, the old pagan beliefs never really did die out. The very powerful symbolism of the travelling dead was too strong to be satisfied by this new, more abstract Catholic feast day.⁸ Allen summarises the problem succinctly:

The intent was to counter pagan influences and provide a Christian alternative. But most often the church only succeeded in “Christianizing” a pagan ritual--the ritual was still pagan, but mixed with Christian symbolism. That's what happened to All Saints Eve--it was the original Halloween alternative!⁹

⁵ Allen, “Christians and Halloween,” Smith 2003, p 65

⁶ Santino 1983, p 7

⁷ Allen, “Christians and Halloween”

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In the end, Christians have to be careful in how we approach Halloween. It is easy to say, “Let's just have fun,” but we must note that even dabbling in its pagan festivities could open the door to lawlessness, which will become rampant in the Last Days. Think of the analogy of the frog in a beaker of water that is being gradually brought to a boil – it does not know that eventually, the temperature of the water will kill it; by then, it would be too late. The Christian church has become so concerned about being relevant to modern society in order to reach unbelievers, that some parts of it have become insensitive to the heart of God. Harry Potter might be entertaining, but it has roots linked to witchcraft.¹⁰ Jesus did not refrain from speaking the truth, even when it was offensive to His hearers. An Australian friend of mine once told his teenage son that their family would not read Harry Potter books because the series had demonic roots. Later in school, the son unashamedly shared with his schoolmates why he and his family did not read Harry Potter. The teenager was quite direct, but sometimes the truth needs to be told.

Redemption of Halloween might be useful, if harvest festivals and the like help Christians to share the light of the gospel. But Christians should ask God for wisdom as to how to conduct such festivals. Christians should also not turn away children who show up at their doorstep asking for trick-or-treats. Rather, they can tell the children that they do not celebrate Halloween, but give some candy as a blessing and share with them why there is a corollary to darkness – the light of the Gospel and Jesus Christ. Christians should not be divine sulks.

In the end, whether Christians celebrate redemptive events in place of Halloween, or reject celebrating Halloween altogether, Jesus should be celebrated. Jesus' love is better than wine (Song of Songs 1:2) and He is the chief among ten thousand (Song of Songs 5:10). In light of His beauty, Christians should ask themselves if redemptive events in place of Halloween are meant to help them “cope” in the absence of the “fun” of celebrating Halloween. Why settle for such redemptive events when Jesus and Jesus alone is sufficient? Jesus can be loved and worshipped,

¹⁰ Boehm 2006, p 114. The Hogwarts School in Harry Potter parallels real-life Ophidian Witchcraft for the veneration of serpents

not only on October 31, but 365 days a year! We should not settle for anything less. C.S. Lewis puts it beautifully:

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday by the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹¹

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1965, pp 1-2, cited in John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2003, p 20