

Halloween: A Fun Neighborhood Event or Participation in the World of Spirits?

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Abstract: Halloween is a very popular holiday in the United States. This article reviews its history and explores connections to spirits, witches, fear, and ongoing practices. The article seeks to clarify ways in which Christians can respond to this holiday and even be in mission.

Introduction

Halloween is an obvious contact point for many people in the United States with that which is dark and spooky. Ghosts and skeletons hanging from trees, tombstones and witches in yards, neighborhood get-togethers, trick or treating, lots of little kids' books and TV shows bring Halloween to almost everyone. Because we Christians who live in the United States live with this holiday, it seems profitable to explore Halloween's history, what goes on in the present day in our country, and some applicable teachings from Scripture. Halloween is celebrated different ways in different places, and Christians serious about living out their faith have come to a wide variety of positions concerning this holiday. It is hoped that this article will contribute to compassionate conversation and also offer helpful insights as we react, interact, and just plain live with Halloween.

Halloween appears to have to do with spirits, death, the dead, ghosts, witches, and more. Is Halloween an introduction to hidden spiritist activities or just pseudo-spiritual stuff for amusement? Is Halloween a dangerous dabbling in the spirit world or a fun neighborhood event? To begin the conversation, here is a brief look at the history of Halloween.

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Historical Roots of Halloween

Halloween is thought to have roots in at least three major influences. The Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced Sow-in) appears to be the earliest of those. The festival related to Pomona, Roman goddess of agriculture, added certain aspects; and the Western Christian Church contributed with All Saints remembrances. Finally, the opportunity to make money by selling costumes, candy, and decorations has helped to shape the Halloween that most of us know today.

Some two thousand years ago, Samhain was the most important festival of the ancient Celts, celebrating a night for Samhain the god of the dead and his re-judging of those who had already died. Celts believed that spirits of the dead, both good and evil, were set free to roam in the land of the living.¹ They put out food and drink for refreshment of the spirits of the beloved dead, whom they hoped Samhain would allow to stop in their homes. Some people also dressed up in costumes to hide from,² frighten away, or lead away evil spirits for the protection of the living. Druids and others who dealt with omens saw this night also as particularly important for divination, because of the possible contributions from the visiting spirits.³ In general, Samhain seems quite similar to events connected with spirits in other cultures. For example, during Día de los Muertes in Mexico and O-bon in Japan, food and drink are offered for visiting spirits of the dead.

The Romans celebrated a harvest festival for the goddess Pomona. This festival also had romantic connotations because Pomona had been tricked into falling in love. Her festival reflected this particularly by the use of apples, the Roman symbol of love. When the festivals related to Pomona and Samhain merged, many people in the British Isles used games with apples and nuts to predict one's spouse.⁴

As the Christian church grew in Europe, Christians lived out their new faith next to neighbors celebrating Samhain and other festivals. In AD 610, Pope Boniface IV began the All Saints tradition by setting aside May 13 of that year to remember all early Christians who died for their faith.⁵ Around a century later, Pope Gregory intentionally moved the official remembering to November 1, coinciding with Samhain, as if the church "was trying to absorb the pagan celebrations taking place at this time."⁶ Thus, it is that Halloween received its name from the Christian church. All Saints Day was then called All Hallows and the evening before, All Hallows Eve. It isn't hard to see how that was shortened into Halloween.

The church remembered its dead on Halloween and All Hallows with customs similar to what was done in the past. The church encouraged Christians to pray for the dead, and in the British Isles a custom developed of baking "soul cakes," which were given to the poor; in exchange, the poor would pray for the giver's dead relatives.⁷ It was the custom that people would put out wine with the soul cakes for the souls of the departed whom they still believed visited on that night.⁸ Young people went "guising," dressing in costume, going from house to house and asking

for food, drink, or money in exchange for singing, poetry reading, or telling jokes.⁹ Carved-out, candle-lit turnips sat on gate posts to ward off evil spirits.¹⁰ Ghost stories were often told around bonfires at harvest time. While the Druids did this more out of fear, with Christians it was to honor the dead.¹¹

As the centuries passed, Halloween changed into what we know it as today. For a time in the Middle Ages, some Reformers tried unsuccessfully to do away with All Saints Day and the evening that went before it. Indeed, Christians not only held on to this celebration, they brought it with them wherever they went.¹² The Christian colonists who brought Halloween to North America also believed in witches and the occult. In Virginia, for example, “settlers in trouble were often as likely to consult astrology, chiromancy, fortune-telling or divination as they were their God.”¹³ At that time, people did still believe in the spirits and spiritual activity. An eroding of belief in the reality of the spiritual world enabled the Halloween to be more about fun than genuine spirituality. In the United States today, Halloween is second only to Christmas for revenue, bringing in around six billion dollars each year for such things as costumes and candy.¹⁴ On a different note, starting in 1950 on Halloween, children were encouraged to go door to door but to ask for donations to UNICEF instead of candy, and many children have done this.¹⁵ Although traditions vary slightly around the United States, Halloween is a standard, unavoidable part of mainstream culture.

Seeing the connections between present-day Halloween traditions and the past traditions comes rather easily. Already in the days of the colonists, black cats and broomsticks were associated with witches, providing our time with much used decoration ideas. Switch pumpkins for turnips and one has jack-o-lanterns. “Guising” easily provides a background for trick-or-treating. And apple bobbing finds its roots in the Roman time! On a slightly different note, the sexualized costumes and activities that sometimes also appear on Halloween may find their roots in the festival of Pomona. Although the visiting spirits of the dead are clearly central to the history of Halloween, it is well worth noting that not all of Halloween’s history points in the direction of the spirits. The Christian church’s contribution of remembering the saints fundamentally changed and named the holiday we know today.

Halloween in the United States in the Twenty-First Century

Halloween is hardly limited to the 31st of October anymore. For at least the month of October, grocery stores push candy and decorations. People also decorate their homes and yards before Halloween. The decorations often are spooky and have to do with the dead. Bones stick out of the ground, and grave stones lean in yards. Giant cobwebs and spiders, or even ghosts, skeletons, or fake bodies may hang from trees. Although it is likely that those decorating are doing so in fun, the connections to earlier celebrations of the dead are obvious.

Children often get to dress up in their costumes more than once, because many communities have parties or other events, like Trunk or Treat, on nights before the 31st. Costumes may be of their favorite hero, a cartoon, or something different. Some people try to make themselves look scary and others are creative with famous people or occupations. Some families work around a theme like characters from *Alice in Wonderland* or s'mores, so that each member in the family plays a part. Some churches offer Halleluiahs Nights or Trunk or Treat. At a Trunk or Treat event, children walk from one decorated car trunk to others in a parking lot to receive candy or pencils. In some places, neighbors gather to hang out. Some may bring out fire pits. They sit together with their supply of candy and visit while they have fun distributing it. People also get together for parties as adults.

Perspectives:

People from different walks of life and different ages may vary in their opinions of Halloween. The following is a sample of perspectives and ideas from various sources, ending with the range of answers from Christians.

- Two people commented that people today don't think of the spirit world when they have fun with goblins, witches, or zombies. They think it is just clean fun that they see in movies and on games.
- A Christian, who knows a number of Wiccans, said that when asked the Wiccans are very tight-lipped and unwilling to share about their celebration of Halloween.
- Other Wiccan said that they didn't really celebrate Halloween, as it is too commercialized.
- A retired public school teacher said that she doesn't like Halloween. She remembered, though, that when she taught in the public school, they had the children dress up as storybook characters and each classroom would have a parade through the school. This event pushed children into books and being creative with their parents.
- One person said that in some Minneapolis schools they celebrate Orange Day instead of Halloween. Apparently some religions took offense to Halloween, and so they removed it from the schools, substituting something else so that the schools can still have a party atmosphere.
- A university instructor spoke of Wiccan students asking to be excused for "their holiday."
- An article written to Muslim parents warned them to first examine what the holiday Halloween is really about and that they might not want to participate once they knew.¹⁶

Christians take various stances, ranging from total avoidance to complete participation.

- One Christian family has a tradition of going out to eat at a certain restaurant in order not to be home during the normal trick-or-treating hours. Their children did not dress up in costumes.
- One mom commented that she hates Halloween. She remembered her children seeing and disliking the ghosts and manikins hanging in trees.
- One lady said that, until she and her husband had children, they just kept their door closed. She believes that, historically, Halloween comes from a pagan source that glorifies fear and death. Now they let their children dress up in appropriate costumes and try to teach them to figure out who they are going to glorify. She also figures that smiles and friendliness to the neighbors is a way to share God's love. She thinks that tracts would probably just become litter.
- Some churches offer a Hallelujah Party for children and young people. Games and activities are provided in hopes of offering Christ-centered fun.¹⁷
- A young mother shared that Halloween gives her an opportunity to share about Jesus. With her children and others, she explains the history of Halloween but then also brings in her faith. Her children know that we don't have to be afraid of evil spirits because God sent Jesus to defeat them. Jesus is more powerful and is with us.
- The Rev. Ronald Hodges, pastor of Salt Lake City's Christ United Methodist Church, is not concerned about Halloween and its pagan origins. He said: "If [we] believe fully in the omnipotence of God, then concern about witches, ghosts and goblins, and things that go bump in the night, is misplaced. It is God alone who rules creation, and persons need not fear . . . the dark side of the human experience." Referring to Wiccans, he commented: "We do not condemn [them]. Nor do we believe that what they practice brings them the peace, hope or joy of the Christian faith."¹⁸
- A Lutheran school has fun on Halloween with a Creation Day. Classrooms pick a theme from creation, like bats, study about it and make costumes accordingly.
- A college student said that doing something with the original purpose for All Hallows' Evening might be a good thing.
- Similarly, a mom thought that taking time to remembering the saints who have gone before us in the faith can offer us heroes to emulate. She plans to look up stories of some saints and share those with her children and make that a part of their traditions. (The beginning of the Lutheran Reformation with the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses gives Lutherans an obvious story for starting such a tradition.)
- Another family emphasized the Reformation, but also let the children go trick-or-treating.

- The Rev. Paul Kucynda, a priest at the Holy Resurrection Russian Orthodox Church in Wayne, N.J., shared that they have a fall festival at which the children of the congregation make scarecrows and play games.¹⁹
- Anderson M. Rearick III, a university professor, shared, “Give up nothing—I have always considered Halloween a day to celebrate the imagination, to become for a short time something wonderful and strange, smelling of grease paint, to taste sweets that are permissible only once a year. How wonderful to be with other children dressed up as what they might grow up to be, what they wished they could be, or even what they secretly feared. All of us, dreams and nightmares, were brought together on equal footing, going from door to door to be given treats and admired for our creativity. How delightful to go to parties with doughnuts, apples, brown cider, and pumpkin cakes—and to hear spine-tingling ghost stories and feel our hearts skip a beat when the teller grabbed for us.”²⁰

Applicable Christian Teachings

Although Christians hold such varied opinions about Halloween, there are certain teachings upon which it may be hoped that all Christians would agree. These teachings may form a foundation on which each of us can build, as Christians, in our varied situations, in conversation with one another and with those outside our family of faith.

1. God alone is God.

The Triune God is God alone. “You shall have no other gods” (Ex 20:3, NIV). Fortune-telling, reading palms, contacting the spirits are ways that people try to get around God alone being in control. A Protestant pastor said, “Exodus 22:18 reads, ‘You shall not permit a sorceress to live.’ It sounds to me like God is serious about this issue. . . . To have our kids dress up as witches or the devil, if we have paper ghosts in our windows or have tombstones in our yards or attend haunted houses, are we not imitating evil, even glorifying it?”²¹ God is serious about such things not only for His own sake, but also for our protection.

Many Americans likely miss the need for protection because they do not believe that evil spirits and demons really exist. Spirits and ghosts appear in movies just like Batman, Captain America, and Darth Vader. It is easy and more comfortable to dismiss the spirits as imaginary and amusing. Playing around with spirits, like being frightened by ghost stories or in haunted houses, seems fun. These pseudo-spiritist trappings of Halloween are generally accepted or embraced by American society at large. For someone who doesn’t believe in the real existence of spirits, there seems to be no need to be cautious.

2. Evil Spirits, the devil, and witches are real.

However, the devil, evil spirits, and witches are real. The devil and spirits are mentioned many times throughout the Bible. One source put the number of witches in the United States today at more than 400,000.²² Two stories serve as an example of modern-day spiritism. A woman named Barbara shared her struggle with the spirit world. In her video, she explained that she was dedicated to be a medium before birth, and it was a long road to get out of it. She also said that people seem to have a fascination with the supernatural, but getting close to the spirits opens the door to the enemy.²³ Another young woman, a Hmong, was told that she was supposed to be a shaman. She had a horrible time getting out of that spiritual realm. These things are real, and those involved have realistic fear of spirits and their power.

3. Death is real.

While this may seem an obvious point, death is not normally a part of everyday life in the United States, and it is generally an uncomfortable topic to discuss. People don't die, they "pass." Halloween, with its ghosts and skeletons, is a time where death is put right in front of us again. The reality in our world is that death lies ahead of us, unless Christ returns beforehand (1 Cor 15:22). Especially for families with young children, Halloween decorations may spark questions, opening an opportunity for conversation about death and what happens, and what Christ did for us so that we don't need to fear our own deaths. Ultimately, Christ is exactly the Savior we needed because no one else faced death and won (1 Cor 15:20–28).²⁴

4. Spiritual warfare is ongoing.

Since spirits are real, everyone is involved, knowingly or not, in a spiritual battle. For Christians, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12, NIV).

Sometimes discovering that spirits actually exist and that there is this ongoing battle might be disconcerting or even frightening. Christians have an answer for that, which the following story shows. Our family's attitude toward spirits changed a lot during the six years that we lived in Nigeria. Many people in our area still worshiped their ancestors and other spirits, including sacrificing to them at times. It was difficult to ignore the reality of the spirit world. One incident will always stay with us. A young pastor was holding his little baby and was explaining that, according to their customs, he should be making a sacrifice to the spirits of the ancestors to protect the baby. We expected him to say that he would not do it because he now knew that those spirits weren't real. Instead of that, he said, "The reason that I won't do the libations is because the Spirit of Jesus is stronger."

5. Christ is greater than all the forces of evil.

This, then, is the answer concerning the spirits and Christianity: Christ is supreme. John clearly states, “the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 Jn 4:4, NIV). Christ’s supremacy is reinforced by many recorded instances of His casting out evil spirits. Finally, for those who belong to Christ, the issue is not “Are there spirits?” but “I belong to Christ and so I need not fear the spirits.”

6. Avoid toying with danger.

Belonging to Christ is a treasure worth protecting. Does Halloween with its pseudo-spirit stuff pose a spiritual danger to Christians? To be sure, and most things in life do. Christians need to be watchful of danger in all things. The devil is crafty and seeking whom he can devour (1 Pt 5:8). As Paul also wrote, “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Cor 10:12, NIV). Two aspects of Halloween do raise concerns: things with spirits and some sexual practices that happen today.²⁵ It would be foolish to dive completely into spiritist practices, like consulting mediums. It would also be foolish to participate in sexual practices forbidden by God.²⁶ These things endanger our souls. Letting our children dress up and pass out candy is not exactly the same thing. Also, communities, neighborhoods, and situations differ from one another, and Christians need to be aware of their own situation and to be responsible and faithful there.

7. Refrain from judging one another.

Within the Christian community, we can find some Christians who are seriously bothered by Halloween and other Christians who are seriously bothered that the other Christians are bothered. This may be an unfortunate example of a tendency within the church to judge one another. Many Christians live with the feeling of needing to measure up and be good enough. We sometimes revert to judging others as we seek to satisfy ourselves that we really are okay. Both by judging others and fearing to be judged, we often descend into closed-mindedness, refusing in our fears to be open to the conversations with our neighbors, whether at home or at church. We can too easily latch on to what seems to be the “right” answer concerning Halloween and then shut our minds to other things because someone else’s “right” choice may make us feel condemned for our own.

The most obvious answer to any struggles with judgmentalism is grace. It is exactly the person who fears judgment who is most likely to judge others. God’s grace says that you are forgiven, beloved, and okay. And that can be our starting point for looking at life and Halloween.

Indeed, all of life is affected by sin. Isaiah wrote that everything, even seemingly good choices and actions, in our world is tainted by sin (Is 64:6). Setting ourselves the task of choosing “rightly” concerning Halloween or anything else sets us up for failure, because it is impossible to choose perfectly. We are called to live lives of faith, and living faithfully is walking in the light. We don’t pretend that we don’t have sin. Instead we just walk in the light with our sin made visible and “the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:7, NIV).

More than just cleansing us from all sin, God also works all things together for good for those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose (Rom 8:28). And that also includes Halloween. Good is not just done by Christians, because God uses many, many people and events for the sustaining of His creation. God can and does work good, even with Halloween. Although some Christians may doubt it, Halloween is definitely included in “all things.” He has promised it. And His protection, His promise of doing good, may provide the safety net that some Christians need to be able to see that their neighbors might just be trying to be involved, to be good neighbors when they put up scary decorations. Can we enjoy that instead of condemning them?

8. Be willing to be different.

Paul wrote that we are not to “conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of [our] mind” (Rom 12:2). At times, it is important to be different: when we believe participation might endanger our faith and when we think participating may give an inaccurate picture of who we are and who Christ is. If we go along with something we know to be wrong only to fit in, we betray the freedom of the Gospel because we allow other people to think either that we don’t really believe what we say we believe or that we aren’t free in Christ to not worry about the opinions of other people. Many people would love to be free of peer pressure, and when we are willing to be different by not doing what is obviously wrong, we can shine like a light to other people who may feel trapped by the situation. If there is a way we don’t need to fear what other people think, then maybe they could learn about our way. It is still important not to judge, but being different need not be the same as judging. We can show the world the difference.

9. Be light.

Halloween provides at least two opportunities for being light. We can be light in what we teach our children, and we can be light in our relationships with our neighbors and community. God’s love for us and the peace He offers us enable us to be different not for the sake of standing out, but for the sake of the hope that is in us.

We can teach our children our faith, the hope that we have. We can teach them they need not fear any spirits or death because Christ holds them close and He is

stronger. We can teach them to love their neighbors even when they might disagree with them or choose different actions. Even the words we use to talk about things that our neighbors do are an avenue for teaching our children.

Being light with our neighbors necessitates being in relationship with them. A light shut up in our own homes, separate from the others, does not aid them. Interacting with our neighbors, inquiring about their lives, being present and available to listen or to help when the car won't start—these are ways of being lights for our neighbors. All of that forms a foundation for how we interact with them around Halloween. Sometimes older neighbors are really excited to give out candy and see costumes of our little children. Sometimes it might be teenagers whom we can welcome to celebrate with our kids in perhaps a different way. We need to be willing to listen and to learn about them. We can make our choices to fit the context, the neighborhood, in which we live.

10. Christian life as a life of celebration

God filled the year of the Hebrews with memorials, events to remember certain parts of their history. As the creator of all, God also invented laughter, enjoyment, and celebrations. At times, Christians can forget both the celebrating and the remembering. We can become somber and stuck, looking only at the daily run of our lives. Halloween in times past was for Christians to remember saints who had died in the faith. Today we don't need to worry about putting out food or drink for famished spirits of our loved ones, but we can celebrate their lives and Christ who saved them. We can tell stories of our loved ones and of Christians from years ago and build those into our Halloween traditions. In the midst of our hectic lives, we can relax, celebrate, and laugh, trusting that God, who made a path through the Red Sea, who sent Christ to die for us, who has promised to work all things for our good, will take care of us tomorrow. For a night, we can relax, hang out with friends and neighbors, and be goofy, if we so choose.

Celebrating wholeheartedly may be an answer for any parents concerned with their children's missing out. In our society, not doing what other people do is often associated with missing out, with not having enough. Christian parents may have a legitimate concern about restrictions, like no trick-or-treating, putting a negative connotation on the Christian faith. It is good to remember that God, His love for us, and the lives He gives us are all worth celebrating. This attitude might enable us to find ways to really and truly celebrate life, including Halloween or not, and the gifts God gives us.

Conclusion: Living Freely in a Broken World—Mission

Finally, as Christians, we are enabled to look at Halloween as we look at all of life. First, we begin at the cross as sinners who are forgiven and loved. As sinners, we can remember that we are not in a position to judge others or ourselves; and because we have been forgiven, we can remember that God dealt compassionately with us and that He loves all the people around us exactly the same way.

Second, we consider that Halloween may push us into interactions with those who believe differently than we do, both Christian and non-Christian. Living in confidence because God has us and He has promised never to let go, we can relax. God has given us the freedom to make mistakes and not be perfect.²⁷ We can pray and ask God to help us, not so that we make the perfect choices, but so that in the interaction, the difference that Christ makes in our lives will be revealed, also at Halloween.

Endnotes

¹ Lesley Pratt Bannatyne, *Halloween An American Holiday, An American History* (USA: Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group, USA, 1990), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ “Ancient Origins of Halloween” in “History of Halloween,” History Channel, A&E Networks, LLC, 2015, <http://www.history.com/topics/halloween/history-of-halloween>.

⁴ Bannatyne, *Halloween An American Holiday*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷ “Today’s Halloween Traditions” in “History of Halloween,” History Channel, A&E Networks, LLC, 2015, <http://www.history.com/topics/halloween/history-of-halloween>.

⁸ “England” in “Geography of Halloween,” Wikipedia, May 11, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_Halloween.

⁹ “Bet You Didn’t Know: Halloween,” History Channel, A&E Networks, LLC, video, 3:00, <http://www.history.com/topics/halloween/history-of-halloween/videos/bet-you-didnt-know-halloween>.

¹⁰ Bannatyne, *Halloween An American Holiday*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴ “Bet You Didn’t Know: Halloween,” History Channel, video.

¹⁵ “Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF,” Wikipedia, Oct. 28, 2014, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trick-or-Treat_for_UNICEF.

¹⁶ “13 Tips for Dealing with Halloween,” *SoundVision.com*, Tip 1, <http://www.soundvision.com/info/misc/hollo/13tips.asp>.

¹⁷ B. A. Robinson, “What Various Faith Groups Believe about Halloween,” *Religious Tolerance.org*, Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, Oct. 29, 1999, http://www.religioustolerance.org/hallo_re.htm.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Anderson M. Rearick III, “Matters of Opinion: Hallowing Halloween— Why Christians should embrace the devilish holiday with gusto—and laughter,” *Christianity Today* (October 2, 2000), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/october2/29.79.html>.

²¹ Robinson, “What Various Faith Groups Believe about Halloween.”

²² “Bet You Didn’t Know: Witches” History Channel, A&E Networks, LLC, video, 3:00, <http://www.history.com/topics/halloween/history-of-halloween/videos/bet-you-didnt-know-witches>.

²³ Barbara Arthur, “The Truth about Witchcraft,” *Christian Broadcasting Network TV*, 2012, video, 5:49, <http://www.cbn.com/tv/1434206552001>.

²⁴ Jesus defeated death.

²⁵ N. Rogers, *Halloween—From Pagan Ritual to Party Night* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Rogers tells of the party and sexual side of Halloween in his book.

²⁶ Centuries ago when the Christian Church was trying to figure out what behaviors were important for Gentile Christians to do, the leaders of the church chose to ask them to abstain from sexual immorality as one of the two requests. Acts 15:29.

²⁷ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 189.