

What to Do With Halloween?



A Pastor's Perspective: by Pastor Mike Tappa of Life Bridge Christian Church

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Halloween has become one the most popular and celebrated holidays in American culture. This holiday is only second to Christmas in how much money Americans spend to celebrate it. In 2010 that amount was near \$6 billion. Most Americans participate in Halloween in some way, even if it is as minimal as giving away candy at their door. This holiday is almost impossible to ignore, especially if you have children. Regardless what you think of this holiday, it is not going to go away. In fact, it seems to gain more popularity every year.

There is much debate within the Christian culture as to what amount of participation is acceptable for a believer. Many view it as a harmless time of fun and others see it as a an open door to the Satanic and spiritual realm. Some of the questions that Christians ask regarding Halloween are: Is it all right to go trick or treating? Should we dress our kids up in costumes? What about carving pumpkins? Is it all right to attend a Halloween party? And, what about haunted houses?

Up until just recently, my answer to all of these questions, based on what I had been told, would have been to play it safe and just avoid anything that is associated with this holiday. However, as a pastor, I decided to take another look at providing a reasonable answer to these questions, and not just giving a blanket answer as to why these things should be avoided at all costs. In past years, I have written some things regarding this day that I have come to discover, were more based on fears and myth than on actual fact. I do not think this new information has affected my opinion drastically, but if we are to judge something, we must at least judge it based on true facts, rather than myth. If you have read and based your view of Halloween on one of my previous articles, I apologize for not providing you with the most accurate information I could find, but it appears that there is significant disagreement on what is true and what is legend or myth. The best place to start, is to try to get an understanding of what this holiday is really based on, and then look into what the Bible says about it. I have read many different articles regarding Halloween, from Pagan, Christian and historical viewpoints, and have discovered that at best, there is much confusion and fear regarding this holiday.

You don't have to look very far into our celebration of Halloween to see references to things like witches, spells, goblins (demons), black cats, monsters, killing, haunted houses and things relating to the dead, such as: tombstones, skeletons, and ghosts. Who can deny that vast majority of the symbols that have come to represent Halloween have to do with darkness, the spirit world, fear, death and the occult? Because these things have nothing to do with the theme of the New Testament, which is LIFE AND LIGHT, how should we respond as believers? As with all things, we need to look at what the Bible tells us about those things and respond to what God says.

"When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, be very careful not to imitate the detestable customs of the nations living there. For example, never sacrifice your son or daughter as a burnt offering. And do not let your people practice fortune-telling, or use sorcery, or interpret omens, or engage in witchcraft, or cast spells, or function as mediums or psychics, or call forth the spirits of the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord.

Deut 18:9-12 NLT

"For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate,' says the Lord. 'Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,' says the Lord Almighty."

2 Corinthians 6:14b-18 NIV

"And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them."

Ephesians 5:11 NIV

"This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

1 John 1:5-7 NIV

As we can see by the Scripture references above, God is pretty clear about what our participation should be in these types of things. Because of that, I believe that as followers of Jesus Christ we need to be very careful and discerning regarding our level of participation in this holiday. Anything that is associated with bringing attention to things such as: witchcraft, the occult, death, fear (haunted houses), the spirit world (ghosts & demons) or Satan, are definitely not appropriate for someone who claims to be a believer in Christ. That being said, there seem to be some aspects of this holiday that would fall into the realm of personal conviction. Please read Romans 14:1-13, regarding how to deal with these personal convictions.

What level of participation in Halloween you choose is something only you can decide. Whatever you participate in as a believer, whether Halloween or anything else, you must always stop and question, why am I doing what I am doing? What is the purpose? Does this honor God? Am I being a light in the world? Let's be more purposeful in what we do. Maybe there are some aspects of this predominately dark holiday where we can bring some light. Some of the activities can be harmless and can be an opportunity for you to sit down with your children and discuss some of things that come up at Halloween. You can help them through the process of learning to discern what will honor God and what won't. The following pages may help you in gaining a better understanding of where this Holiday originated and some of the traditions that go along with it.

The Origin of Halloween

Over 2,000 years ago, before Christ was born, the Celtic people originally lived in central Europe and gradually migrated to Great Britain. They were a neo-pagan culture which worshiped a multitude of gods, which they believed existed in things of nature. They differ from pagan groups such as Wicca, in that modern day Wiccans worship a single goddess and god of nature verses the multitude of gods worshiped by the Celts. The priests of this ancient nature worship were known as Druids. As with all aquaria societies, harvest celebrations were common, so in the fall of the year, after the harvest, on Oct. 31- Nov.2, the Druid priests began celebrating the feast of Samhain (pronounced Sow-win), which means "end of summer". It is often cited by some Christian writers that Samhain was actually the name of the Celtic god of death. This, however appears to be only a myth, as according to any historical data I could find, the Celtic people never worshiped a god of death. However, it was and still is the name for a holiday which is celebrated today by many neo-pagan and pagan groups, such as Wicca. In the ancient Celtic culture they also believed that November 1st was the beginning of the new year which began on the evening of Oct.31st. They believed as well, that the veil that existed between the natural world and the spirit world, was at it's thinnest on this day. This meant that the souls of those who had died were able to cross over and revisit this world. There is some belief that the Celts thought that the sinful souls of those who died during the previous year, were transferred to the bodies of animals and may even be able to inhabit humans, and through gifts and sacrifices, these souls could be freed to claim their heavenly reward. Legend also indicates that sacrifices of food, animals, and sometimes even humans were offered to protect people from the dead. Others believe that these sacrifices were made solely out of thankfulness to the gods and goddesses of nature for the harvest they provided. Whatever these sacrifices were for, they were offered to pagan gods and goddesses and were an abomination to the one true God. See Romans chapter 1.

As the Roman Catholic Church spread to Great Britain, some of the old Celtic customs and beliefs were maintained alongside the Catholic teachings and traditions. This mixture of paganism and Catholicism is

very common even today, in cultures such as in Mexico , South America, the Philippines, as well as other places where the Roman Catholic Church tried to evangelize pagan cultures. In order to persuade these pagans to discontinue their pagan worship and traditions which honored their false gods, in 731 AD, Pope Gregory III moved All Saints Day (All Hallows Day), from the spring to November 1st. This Roman Catholic Holy Day is a recognition of all the saints that had been martyred for their faith.

The evening prior to All Hallows Day, became known as “ All Hallows Eve” and eventually “Halloween”. Later, Pope Gregory IV, initiated the Catholic Holy Day of “All Souls Day”, which was established to honor not only the martyrs who had died, but anyone who had died who was part of the church. The church also believed that the souls of those who died in sin had not yet gained access to heaven, and dwelled in a place called purgatory, where they were made to do penance for their sin. To aide in getting these souls to heaven, prayers of the living would need to be offered and Masses would have to be said. All Saints Day and All Souls Day are still celebrated today in the Roman Catholic Church. In spite of the efforts to make these Holy Days of the church totally Christian, the Celts and Druids held on to many of their traditions and superstitions for Oct. 31st. The concept and customs of “All Hallows Eve” (Halloween) were brought to the U.S. by European immigrants, but wasn’t widely celebrated until the influx of Irish immigrants in the mid 1800’s. It gradually spread among the American people and has now become an American holiday.

Customs of Halloween

You may be wondering how customs like bonfires, “Trick or Treating” and things such as “Jack-O-Lanterns” became part of Halloween. Most of these things were inspired by the Celtic pagans and were part of their pagan rituals and cultural folklore.

Bonfires

According to legend, the Celts believed that the bonfire represented the sun and was used to aid the Druid in his fight with dark powers. The term bonfire comes from the words "bone fire," literally meaning the bones of sacrificed animals, sometimes human, were piled in a field with timber and set ablaze. During the Festival of Samhain, a sacred fire would be lit which would burn all through the winter and sacrifices would be offered to the gods and goddesses on the fires. The practice of sacrificing humans was stopped around 1600, and an effigy was sometimes burned instead.

One thing that seems to be accepted as a historical fact, is that because this was also the celebration of the New Year, all the fires in the hearths of the Celts were extinguished on that evening, and a new fire was started by the people carrying torches that were lit from the sacred fire to their homes. This fire festival was a time to prepare for the new year. Out with the old and in with the new! Some resources, cited that this night was one of four fire festivals throughout the Celtic year. Throughout history, fire has usually been a significant part of both pagan and non-pagan religious and sacrificial rituals.

Trick or Treating

One of many legends I found, states that Samhain was the supreme night of spirit jubilation. It was believed that spirits known as fairies (evil spirits) would enter our world. These fairies were noted for their mischief and malice. The Celts also believed that on this night the dead could rise out of their graves and wander the countryside, trying to return to the homes where they formerly lived. Frightened villagers tried to appease these wandering spirits by offering them gifts of fruit and nuts, and some believe that this is the origin of our present day "trick-or-treat." They began the tradition of placing plates of the finest food and bits of treats that the household had to offer on their doorsteps, as gifts, to appease the hunger of the ghostly wanderers. If not placated, villagers feared that the evil spirits would kill their flocks or destroy their property.

Another legend says that this custom originated from a more Christian European custom called “souling”. Beggars would go from village to village begging for "soul cakes" made out of square pieces of bread. The

more soul cakes the beggars would receive, the more prayers they would promise to say on behalf of the dead relatives of the donors. As I stated earlier, it was believed that the dead remained in purgatory for a time after death, and that prayer, even by strangers could guarantee a soul's passage to heaven.

As the tradition continued, in many parts of Britain and Ireland this night was known as "Mischief Night", which meant that people were free to go around the village playing pranks and getting into any kind of mischief, blaming the pranks on the fairies or evil spirits that inhabited the earth on that night. In order to appease these "pranksters", people would leave them treats to protect their property.

Of the customs that were brought to the United States by Irish and Scottish immigrants in the nineteenth century, the idea of "mischief night" seemed to be the most popular. By the early 20th century, these pranks were getting out of hand. In the late 1920's and early 1930's, something needed to be done in order to curb all the vandalism. It was during this time period that civic organizations, such as the Boy Scouts and churches began having costume parties to provide an alternative to playing pranks. Home owners and businesses also began handing out candy and other sweets such as candied apples to appease these young vandals.

It appears that many different customs and legends seem to have formed together and developed into this modern tradition we call "trick or treating".

Costumes

If the souls of dead loved ones could return that night, so could anything else, human or not, nice or not-so-nice. The only thing the superstitious Celtic people knew to do to protect themselves on such an occasion, was to masquerade as one of the demonic hoard, and hopefully blend in unnoticed among them. Wearing masks and other disguises and blackening the face with soot were originally some of the ways of hiding oneself from the spirits of the dead, who might be roaming around. This appears to be the origin of masquerading as devils, ghosts, monsters, and other demonic-looking creatures. The practice of trying to scare away demons and spirits is still practiced in many pagan cultures today. I have witnessed a similar custom in the far east where people will place mirrors on their front doors in order to scare off any evil spirits as they see themselves in the mirror.

Jack-O-Lanterns

The Jack-O-Lantern is the festival light for Halloween and is the ancient symbol of a damned soul. The Jack-O-Lantern apparently comes from a couple of different Irish folklore. One was about a man named Jack who tricked the devil into climbing a tree. Once the devil was in the tree, Jack attached a cross on the trunk, preventing the devil from coming down. The devil then made a deal with Jack not to allow Jack into hell after he died if only Jack would remove the cross from the tree. After Jack died, he couldn't go to hell, and he couldn't go to heaven. He was forced to wander around the earth with a single candle to light his way. The candle was placed in a turnip to keep it burning longer. This folktale definitely began after the church influenced the Celtic culture, because the Celts were introduced to the Devil and Hell only after it was Christianized.

Another legend also has it, that the Irish would carve out turnips or beets as lanterns as representations of the souls of the dead or goblins freed from the dead. When the Irish emigrated to America they could not find many turnips to carve into Jack-O-Lanterns but they did find an abundance of pumpkins. Pumpkins seemed to be a suitable substitute for the turnips, and pumpkins have been an essential part of Halloween celebrations ever since. Pumpkins were cut with faces representing demons and were originally intended to frighten away evil spirits. It was said that if a demon or such were to encounter something as fiendish looking as themselves that they'd run away in terror, thus sparing the houses dwellers from the ravages of dark entities. They would have been carried around the village boundaries or left outside the home to burn through the night.

Witches and Black Cats

Bats, owls and other nocturnal animals, also popular symbols of Halloween, were originally feared because people believed that these creatures could communicate with the spirits of the dead. Black cats have religious origins as well. During the Middle Ages it was believed that witches could turn themselves into black cats. Thus when such a cat was seen, it was considered to be a witch in disguise. Witches and witchcraft are dominant themes of Halloween. Witches generally believe themselves to be followers of an ancient religion, which goes back far beyond Christianity, and which is properly called 'Wicca'. Witches are really just one side of a modern revival of paganism - the following of pre-Christian nature religions, the attempt to return to worshipping ancient Norse, Greek or Celtic gods and goddesses. The apostle Paul said witchcraft is one of the acts of the sinful nature and those who practice it will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:16-21; see also Revelation 22:15).

Satan Worship and the Occult

The inclusion of satanic ritual and Satan worship being associated with Halloween didn't begin until the Church of Satan adopted Halloween as a holiday in the mid 20th century. Even though Halloween existed long before any official recognition by the Church of Satan, Satanic rituals and occult practices such as divination, communicating with spirits, spell casting, human sacrifice, drinking of human blood and things such as these have all become heavily associated with Halloween. I realize that most people have no intention of worshipping Satan on Halloween; they just are having fun. We must be very careful that whatever we do will not lead anyone to think that dabbling in these types of things is merely fun and games.

Monsters and Haunted Houses

Just as with any other cultural event, if there is money to be made, Hollywood will be part of it. As the celebration of Halloween became more prominent in America during the 1920's and 1930's, Hollywood began to produce movies and introduce us to scary and evil characters. These people and monsters quickly became associated with Halloween. There is something about the adrenaline rush of being scared, that draws people to horror films and haunted houses by the millions. Many of the bloody and evil characters that have come to be associated with Halloween, have been provided by books, movies and television. Even though they are all fictional characters, they do represent a very dark side of life and most have to do with death, and murder and fear.

Conclusion

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, please pray that the Holy Spirit gives you guidance as to what you and your family should do regarding Halloween. He is the one that will guide you and convict your choices if you really seek His will..

If you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, whether you celebrate Halloween or not, is nowhere near as important as where you stand with God. Without a relationship with God through Jesus Christ you are already living your life in darkness. Please seek out someone or find a church where you can learn more regarding God's plan for having a personal relationship with you through His Son Jesus Christ!

I hope this article has helped you in making some decisions regarding Halloween and more importantly where you are in your relationship with God.

Pastor Mike