

THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE
ON HALLOWEEN
HALLOWED OR HARMFUL?

Hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, the Celts, inhabitants of Britain and Ireland, observed a festival on October 31st. Unlike modern-day Halloween, their was no children's holiday. The Celts and their priests, the Druids, celebrated Samhain, a festival that marked the eve of the Celtic New Year which began on November 1st. The fall harvest was complete and winter loomed ahead. The Celts believed the power of the sun was fading. For the next several months, darkness would prevail.

The Celts believed that during Samhain the veil separating the living and the dead was at it's thinnest. They believed on the evening of October 31st, evil spirits and the souls of the dead passed through the barrier and entered the world of the living. Departed family members would revisit their earthly homes. The thought was frightening, and exciting! The Celts believed those spirits and dead souls could torment the living. Crops might be destroyed, babies stolen, and farm animals killed. But this was also an opportunity to commune with the spirits - and divine the future. The Devil, the lord of darkness, was ordinarily feared, but during Samhain, his power would be called upon to foretell the future.

The Issues & Answers series articulates key biblical and theological convictions of Bandon Christian Fellowship.

TRICK OR TREAT

The druids were charged with appeasing the goblins and preventing harm to the people. Huge Samhain bonfires were lit to guide the way of the spirits. Various sacrifices, including human sacrifices, were performed to assure a good year. Several ancient authors comment on the gory religious rites of the Druids.

It is believed that, like many pagan cultures around the world, the Celts left out food for the spirits, hoping "treats" would prevent evil "tricks."

Centuries later, descendants of the Celts continued to observe the Samhain festival by dressing as evil spirits. They roamed from house to house demanding food in exchange for the "spirits" leaving the home unharmed. They carved demon faces in hollowed-out turnips and lit them with candles.

That night they also practice many customs designed to divine the future. Young people roasted nuts in Samhain fires to see which would crack first - and tell them who they would marry. The person who retrieved an apple with his mouth from a tub of water assured himself a lucky year. Obviously some of these customs (like "apple-bobbing") have remained with us, strictly as an amusement.

ALL HALLOWS EVE

When Christianity began to spread through Europe in the third and fourth centuries, the pagan temples were torn down, but pagan worship never completely disappeared. The festival of Samhain remained a primary pagan holiday.

HALLOWEEN IN AMERICA

Irish immigrants in the mid-1800's brought to America the Halloween customs with which were familiar - costumes, trick-or-treat, carved jack-o-lanterns, etcf. The jack-o-lantern is simply an American version of the hollowed-out turnip mentioned earlier. The pumpkin did not grow in Ireland or Britain. They also brought "tricks" with them - which often involved breaking windows and over-turning shed and outhouses.

Even though the practice of actually performing a trick if no treat was given has faded, the custom of children "trick-or-treating" has become an established American tradition. Only in recent years have parents hesitated to send their children into the streets because of the increased danger of accidents, poisoned food, and menacing strangers.

Nonetheless, despite dangers associated with trick-or-treating, Halloween is celebrated more than ever. In fact, for "baby-boomer" adults, Halloween is the second most popular party night of the year (it's second to New Years Eve). Many adults look at it as the one night of the year they can dress up and act foolish.

But while children and adults innocently imitate Celtic customs, darker practices persist. Witches and Satanists still consider Halloween to be one of the best times during the year to cast a spell. On Halloween most witchcraft practitioners participate in a ritual called, "drawing down the moon." In this, they believe the chief witch of the coven (group of witches) becomes a channel or the moon goddess. During the final ritual, the participants, both male and female are "sky clad" - that is, naked.

THE BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO HALLOWEEN

Witches and Satanists are, of course, a small minority. Few people who celebrate Halloween these days ever think about the darkness that underlines most Halloween practices. A beaming child dressed in a black pointy hat and matching gown - with a wart carefully drawn on her nose, and a trick-or-treat bag held tightly in her hand - is hardly thinking of death or the spirits of departed relatives. Nor should she be. She's thinking of candy and fun. She's glowing because of her delight in her special costume. And she's anticipating the adventure of her house to house pilgrimage.

Merchants also look forward to October 31st. The sale of candy, costumes, decorations, and party goods make Halloween one of the major retail seasons of the year. Surely, no one can deny children or adults all the Halloween fun simply because it's unsavory history.

Can there really be anything wrong with this lighthearted revelry? Does the Bible have anything to say about celebrating Halloween?

In Corinth, meat that had been sacrificed to idols were sold in the market. People who bought it, then ate it in honor of that particular pagan god. Speaking of this freedom to eat food that a pagan had dedicated to an idol, the apostle Paul said, "Everything is permissible." (1 Corinthians 10:23) After all, he didn't believe the pagan gods really existed.

If we apply Paul's statement to the celebration of Halloween, then one could argue Christians can dress in ghostly costumes and practice the traditions that have been passed down from the ancient Celts. After all, the supernatural powers they tried to appease don't have power over those who belong to Jesus Christ. The Bible says Jesus destroyed the power of death when He went to the

cross; by Jesus' death and resurrection, anyone who gives his or her life to Jesus doesn't need to fear evil.

But Paul didn't stop with a statement of his freedom. He said, "Everything is permissible - but not everything is beneficial." It is in this light Christians need to examine how to observe Halloween.

THREE REASONS TO EXAMINE HOW YOU CELEBRATE HALLOWEEN

What may not hurt you may hurt others. Paul said it wouldn't harm a Christian to eat meat sacrificed to an idol. After all, the pagan gods to which the meat had been sacrificed weren't real gods. In the same light, he probably would say Christians are not prohibited from dressing in costumes and going trick-or-treating or attending Halloween parties. After all, "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one" (1 Corinthians 8:4). But Paul went on to say, by doing what the believer was free in the Lord to do, the believer may be distressing another believer who doesn't realize he has this freedom. "Be careful however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Corinthians 8:9). The weak ones would be those who still had problems with the idea of eating the food sacrificed to idols. During Halloween, little children in particular are the weak ones. On TV, in movies, in school, and with their playmates, many children today are exposed to occult influences. We may be opening our children to these influences if we approve of these things in Halloween fun. We adults may be fully aware we are only spoofing witches and ghost's, but the young may not be so sure. If we have given our lives to Jesus Christ, then

our eternal destiny is safe in the hands of Almighty God. But that's not true of many people around us. There is a valid reason for most people to fear a "lord of death"- even if they don't take him seriously on Halloween. We who have found life in Jesus should be aware and take care that our freedom doesn't keep others from finding that same eternal life.

Some permissible things may hinder your Christian growth. The Bible encourages us to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus." (Hebrews 12:1-2) This one night of the year, most eyes are not fixed on Jesus, but on a darker image. The Christians "race-of-faith" leads him to eternal life, to a joy that has no shadow. Should we really be focusing on the devil, witches, and other dark beings, even for one night?

God says, "Don't imitate evil!" "When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving to you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who...practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium, or spiritist, or who consults with the dead" (Deuteronomy 18:9-11). If our children dress as witches and sorcerers, if we hang cardboard ghosts in our windows, if we entertain with tales of ghouls and haunted houses - what are we doing but imitating that which is evil.? As Christians we need to make it clear witches and evil spirits are not funny and are not harmless, even if the people in witch costumes are only play-acting.