

## **Unmasking Halloween**

*The holiday's history reveals the tricks behind the treat.*

Every October 31, parents face questions about Halloween, such as, “Should we allow our children to go out trick-or-treating?” and “Should we answer the door and give out candy? Or tracts? Or should we close the windows, turn out the lights and pretend we aren't at home?”

Without a sufficient knowledge of Halloween's history and what the Bible says, it is difficult for a Christian to adequately answer these and other questions about participation in Halloween.

The celebration of what we know as Halloween dates back to before the time of Christ. In the Celtic countries of Britain, Germany and France, the Druids, the priests and teachers of the Celts, set aside October 31 to honor Samhain, the lord of the dead. At this time of year, the crops were harvested and it was a time of general decay. The day honoring Samhain highlighted the gloom and cold of the coming season.

The Celts believed that Samhain assembled all the souls of the dead on October 31, the eve of the Celtic new year, freeing them to return to their homes, where their families were to entertain them. If they didn't find an acceptable welcome, the spirits would cast spells or cause other problems for the living. This became the first form of “trick-or-treat.”

To prepare for the arrival of these spirits, the Druids built huge bonfires, sacrificing animals, crops and even humans. The fire was also used for divination, as they studied the remains of the sacrificed animals. During this ritual, many people wore costumes made of animal heads and skins. When the Romans conquered the Celts, they combined the festival to Samhain with their own festival honoring Pomona, the goddess of fruit and trees, making apples and nuts an important part of the rituals.

### **Popular Throughout History**

As time passed, despite the influence of Christianity, the pagan rite continued. The Irish, for example, held parades to honor Muck Olla, one of their gods. At the head of the parade marched a leader wearing a white robe and an animal head. Those following him asked for food to help celebrate the October 31 festival, punishing farmers who refused to cooperate – another form of trick-or-treat. Bonfires raged throughout Wales, Scotland, England and the rest of Europe on October 31.

To counter this growing pagan rite, in the year 834 Pope Boniface IV moved the church feast of All Saints Day (also known as All Hallows' Day) from May to November 1. October 31 naturally was called All Hallows' Evening – eventually abbreviated Halloween.

In medieval times, satanic witches took Halloween as an opportunity to mock the saints of the church commemorated on All Saints' Day. The witches supposedly flew on broomsticks and were accompanied by black cats (also believed to be a type of witch). In later years, the poor in England went door-to-door for food on November 2, All Souls' Day. Beggars received "soulcakes" in return for their promise to pray for the dead of that household.

Because of the strong religious convictions of the early American settlers, Halloween celebrations were banned. But in the early 1800's, as more immigrants of Celtic origin arrived, Halloween celebrations were instituted, complete with bonfires and death-related symbolism, as well as door-to-door trick-or-treating.

### **Dealing With the Questions**

Despite the contemporary decline in trick-or-treating because of dangers such as poisoned candy, Halloween lives on. School parties, the media and peer pressure all serve to make Halloween a fun and necessary time in children's eyes. Christian parents face extreme difficulty in deciding what their family should do about the annual celebration.

But considering Halloween's origins, it should not be difficult to establish a scriptural position on the holiday, whatever decision is made about participation. Deuteronomy 18:9-12 states:

"When you enter the land which the Lord our God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who cast a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For whoever does these things is detestable to the Lord" (NAS).

### **Scriptural Guidelines**

As Christians seek to make a decision regarding participation in Halloween, it is important to keep in mind that believers are called to:

1. ***Be separate from the world.*** "For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties and abominable idolatries" (1Peter 4:3 NAS)
2. ***Be transformed.*** "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2 NAS)

3. ***Be obedient and holy.*** “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior” (1Peter 1:14-15 NAS).
4. ***Be “God pleasers.”*** “You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4 NAS).
5. ***Be leaders.*** “Do not participate in the unfruitful deed of darkness, but instead even expose them” (Ephesians 5:11 NAS).

A poll by *Christianity Today*, an evangelical Christian magazine, found that 56 percent of respondents said their churches offered alternatives to children for Halloween, while 34 percent said they took a hands-off policy, allowing members to do what they want. Another 4 percent said their churches actively opposed Halloween. It is not unusual for churches not only to sponsor Halloween alternatives, but also to plan special evangelistic outreaches to the community on Halloween night.

Answering questions about distributing candy on Halloween or allowing children to trick-or-treat are things each Christian family and church must face. The roots are undoubtedly pagan, however, and Christians must be careful not to ignore the spiritual dynamics behind this ancient festival.

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