



GIMME SOME SUGAR, BABY...

The holy, hellish, hodgepodge history of Halloween

By Pastor James Harleman

It's a time of year when leaves die and trees turn to skeletons. The garden stops providing. An evening stroll changes from bright sun and chirping birds to dark night and the howling wind. As Halloween approaches, the fact that we begin to consider death and ghost stories is not inherently pagan. It's human. It's what we do with those thoughts that matters.

A recent thread on our Mars Hill Members' Site raised the perennial issue of Halloween and whether Christians should observe this holiday. More to the point, most Christians do observe it, but differ in the level of participation or acceptance of it. Evangelist Jack Chick, for instance, the man famous for "Chick Tracts" depicts Halloween as a night when ancient Celtic Druids raped and sacrificed virgins, leaving carved pumpkins on the doorsteps of households that gave up their daughters (never mind the fact that pumpkins were a New World plant exported and only grown in Europe recently). Other Christians offer the opposite but equally naive defense of "it's no big deal", sending their kids out to eat candy and legitimize American obesity statistics.

Halloween has a long and complex history: following the causal chain linking a pagan harvest festival to toddlers dressed as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles is not simple. Christian and secular historians keep finding layers of revisionist history that try to wrap the origins of this holiday up in a nice little bow (perhaps so it can go under the Christmas tree?). The decorations come out early enough). Before addressing the Christian's response to this holiday, let's look at what little we do know.

Halloween 101

Ancient Celts celebrated a holiday called Samhain (essentially "end of summer"), where they would extinguish

their hearth fires and host large ceremonial bonfires, sacrificing animals and crops. This didn't occur on October 31 but around the same time, depending on the phases of the moon. It marked the end of the harvest and the beginning of a season where the people would be dependent on food stores and shelter from the elements.

Superstitious Celts associated winter with death and thought that the season's transition was marked by the close proximity of spirits; they believed this thin veil would help their Druid priests make prophecies, enabling them to survive the harsh winter. There is an accrued mythology that Druids also wore masks on this night and went from door to door, but historical evidence does support this theory; it seems more like creative fiction manufactured to explain the evolution of modern customs. While not a bad educational supplement, something is not history simply because it appeared on the History Channel.

The name of our present-day holiday, Halloween (or "All Hallows' Eve"), actually stems from a celebration for saints formed by the early church. A celebration day for all saints emerges in church history as early as the 4th century, but it was originally set in May or the day following Pentecost (some records suggest this also paved over a similar Roman day of the dead). It was the Germans who initially shifted the custom to November 1st, and whether or not this had to do with the practices of the Irish Celts is questioned by historians to this day.

In the 8th century, Pope Gregory III universally changed the date to mirror the German date in conjunction with the consecration of the chapel in St. Peter's. "All Hallows' Day" or "All Saints' Day" would later become a day not only to recognize official Catholic Saints, but also to commemorate the dead and visit the cemetery to reflect on family or friends who had passed away.

Several hundred years later, November 2nd would

become "All Souls' Day" in Catholic tradition. All Hallows' Eve simply marked the night before, much like Christmas Eve. A focus on cemeteries and the dead had as much to do with Catholic as Celtic traditions, and the accrued traditions and superstitions are a mixed bag stretching up into our own early immigrant American traditions of harvest festivals, and the way Mexican culture turned All Saints' and Souls' Days into the "Day of the Dead" festival.

Despite myth and folklore imposed in retrospect on this holiday, recent study reveals that trick-or-treating is a fairly new convention that didn't become significant until 1930 in the United States. Europe and other countries co-opted the practice, caught up in our merchandising and global influence. Forms of costumed begging have existed for centuries in Christianized Europe, called "rummung" or "guising" and usually involve singing or performing a short play in exchange for food or drink. Wassailing is another grand tradition of singing and going from house to house.

One of the closest similarities we find with a loose connection to trick-or-treating appears in the Middle Ages on All Souls' Day (November 2nd), where the poor would go from home to home and offer prayers for those in purgatory in exchange for food. However, strong evidence suggests that childish mischief and vandalism on the 30th and 31st in early 1900s America (particularly vicious in Detroit, where October 30, the day before Halloween, became known as "Devil's Night") gave rise to organized evening activity to make actual treats replace the increasing abundance of tricks.

If Christianity did not successfully pave over this holiday (much as Christmas paved over the Roman Saturnalia), Americana certainly did. This has been punctuated visibly with our indigenous pumpkin replacing the original "Jack-O-Lantern", originally an Irish turnip. If Halloween itself was a pumpkin, however, there would truly be nothing left to carve. The seasonal change has been celebrated by pagans and



Christians for centuries, taking on the customs of a dozen cultures along the way. Its present incarnation receives disdain not only from many Christians but also from professing witches and wiccans. The former feel that it's intrinsically tied to satanic beliefs and the latter group sees it as a distorted mockery of their beliefs.

One of the most interesting anecdotes I found in researching the history of Halloween is that the one actively many churches do engage in at replacement events like church "Harvest Festivals" is perhaps the one most easily linked to paganism. Bobbing or "Ducking" for apples was actually a divination ritual related to love and fertility.

To Trick or Not to Treat?

Even if we ascribe church origins to Halloween, the holiday does differ from Christmas. Some will offer that the week in December when we commemorate Christ's birth was once a Roman festival celebrating Saturn, and may have even involved both gift-giving and evergreen décor. They make the case that Christmas is compromised by paganism just like Halloween. They will also mention that most Christians call the day Jesus rose from death "Easter", which has roots in pagan fertility rituals (hence the rabbit and those horribly delectable Cadbury Cream Eggs).

As Christmas and Easter have overrun and co-opted various trappings, however, there is for Christians a clear, central focus on Jesus' incarnation. Halloween may not be inherently evil, but it also has no central, specific focus on the Lord we love. Whether we see Halloween as pagan practices, Catholic traditions, or good old American, candy-coated commercialism, none of these offers great inspiration to participate.

At Mars Hill Church, we don't believe in the deities worshipped by the Celts or the rituals used to appease or summon them. We do, however, recognize that there are evil spirits that confuse and lead people astray from relationship with the one true God. We recognize that the Bible calls all Christians "saints" and don't believe in the Catholic extra-biblical concepts of sainthood or purgatory. Many of the ideas and rituals that have contributed to the Halloween mish-mash aren't congruent with our beliefs. However, setting aside times to remember or honor those we love that have passed away (hopefully to be with our Savior Jesus) is not a bad idea. On a less somber level, wearing Spider-man costumes, making funny faces on vegetables, and engaging in neighborhood activities where one can both give and receive hospitality is not something we oppose. Fictional fantasy tales of monsters and elves – even scary ones – are not wholly inappropriate either, whether punctuated on this particular weekend or sprinkled throughout the year in classic tales from authors including Tolkien and Lewis. We regard Halloween as a second-hand issue and ask that every Christian examine their response to the modern-day Halloween celebration in our culture.

Some members of Mars Hill opt to avoid Halloween altogether because portions of its mixed up history prick their conscience. Others see it as a truly americanized holiday, not specifically Christian but essentially "American" like Thanksgiving or Presidents Day, and have no conscience issues participating. Others still

draw various lines in between, some don't go out and actively participate, but remain in their homes and hand out candy to trick-or-treaters so that they can offer hospitality to their neighbors and community. Others gather together to hold festivities that exclude the more overly creepy or questionable elements.

For those who have shunned Halloween because they were simply told it was evil, or for those who have participated and never bothered to weigh its appropriateness, your pastors would encourage the employment of godly wisdom, discernment, and a sense of our shared mission as Christians. Our absence or participation in regard to Halloween should not be derived from fear, misinformation, or pressure but rather from a sincere love of Jesus; every response to our culture and its festivals is a way to point to the God we love and serve.

Lastly, for parents, don't forget that gluttony is a sin. Careful not to force your kids to learn the hard way: lying on an altar of plastic wrap and tin-foil, holding their bulbous stomachs. If you participate in Halloween, it might be the perfect time to introduce the concept of moderation. *M*

Obscure Halloween Fact:

October 31st is also "Reformation Day"; commemorating the day in 1517 when Christian reformer Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses challenging the doctrine of penances, the authority of the pope, and the usefulness of indulgences. Dressing up the kids like Reformers and handing out doctrinal challenges, however, might not be the wisest form of cultural engagement. The period outfits are cool, though.



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