

Redeeming Holy Days from Pagan Lies — Hallowe'en: A short history

by Pastor Joseph Abrahamson <http://steadfastlutherans.org/?p=23974>

Associate Editor's Note: With this post we want to introduce a series of articles written by Pastor Joseph Abrahamson, a personal friend who grew up not far from me and also then served a parish not far from where I first served. The series is called "Redeeming Holy Days from Pagan Lies" and will focus on the true history behind some of our holidays (holy days) and how pagans and even some Christians help promote the lies.

There is a lot of new mythology about Halloween that has been invented to claim that Halloween is a pagan holiday. It is not, and it never was a pagan holiday.

Where Did Halloween Start in the Christian Church?

In the first three centuries after Christ's resurrection, the lives of the martyrs of the Church were commemorated on the day and in the place where they were killed.

There were so many who were killed because of their faith in Christ during those centuries. Throughout the Christian Church different days were set aside not only for each martyr, but a special day for all Saints.

The earliest reference to a day being dedicated to the commemoration of All the Martyrs and All Saints of the Christian Church comes from the 2nd century. The document is titled "The Martyrdom of Polycarp." Polycarp was a Christian killed because he would not deny Christ. The document says:

Accordingly, we afterwards took up his bones, as being more precious than the most exquisite jewels, and more purified than gold, and deposited them in a fitting place, whither, being gathered together, as opportunity is allowed us, with joy and rejoicing, the Lord shall grant us to celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom, **both in memory of those who have already finished their course, and for the exercising and preparation of those yet to walk in their steps.** (Chapter 18) [Emphasis added]

Later, a Christian Bishop named Ephraim the Syrian mentions a common All Saints' Day in 373. In 397 St. Basil of Caesarea chose a day when the churches of his bishopric would honor the memories of all Saints known, and unknown, alive or in heaven. Later, John Chrysostom mentions a common day of memorial for the Saints in 407 AD.

In the year 609 or 610 Pope Boniface IV established a date for All Saints' Day on May 13th. And later, in the early 700s AD, Pope Gregory III changed the date to November 1st. Decrees like this took some time to propagate from Rome to the more remote areas where the Church was found. But the change in date had nothing to do with any pagan practices. Pope Gregory IV extended the celebration on this day to the entire Western Church in the early 800s. And again, the change took time as it spread from Rome.

The point is this: a common day for commemorating the Saints has been around throughout the Christian Church from very early times. And the fact that it falls on November 1st today has nothing to do with paganism.

OK, so what does this have to do with Halloween? In the Bible the day begins at sundown or evening. This is why we have Christmas Eve. Halloween is All Hallows' Eve', that is All Saints' Evening. Halloween is the beginning of All Saints' Day starting at sundown on October 31st.

These days we have "Trick or Treat," costumes sometimes too gruesome to describe: witches, goblins, werewolves, vampires, zombies, Lady Gaga; Jack-O-Lanterns, skeletons, spooky sounds, grave stones, candy and a celebration of gore and all that is un-Holy.

Many of the Christian Churches in the Reformed traditions claim that Halloween is a pagan celebration. Very often they do this by referring to Neopagan and Wiccan writings. And there are many in the Neopagan and Wiccan communities who have tried hard to claim Halloween as an ancient pagan holiday that had been stolen by the Christian Church.

Don't ever expect truth from Neopagans and Wiccans. They already live in a fantasy world created by their own fakelore.

The claim is that the old folklore demonstrates where we got Halloween. But folklore does not support the Neopagan or the Wiccan claims about Halloween. Instead they depend on fakelore: invented, and fake, pretend folklore, like Pecos Bill and the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd."

The typical claims in current sources are that Halloween come from "ancient Celtic practices, Catholic and Roman religious rituals and European folk traditions." With respect to the origins of All Saints' Day these claim are false. With respect to the modern re-paganizing of Halloween, the Neopagan version of Halloween doesn't really come from ancient pagan sources. It comes from modern sources that pretend to be old but are not. These modern sources are simply fiction.

Doesn't Halloween Have Its Origins in Samhain?

Neopagans and Wiccans like to claim that the source of Halloween is the Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced Sow-in). There are three basic problems with their claim.

1. The celebration of All Saints' Day didn't originate in Ireland or any other area populated by Celts or their descendants.
2. None of the days on which All Saints' Day was celebrated had anything to do with any Celtic holiday.
3. The celebration of All Saints' Day in Celtic regions is documented to be older than the documented celebration of Samhain.

So let us look at each of these three claims:

1. In order for the Neopagan and Wiccan claim that Samhain is the origin of Halloween to be true, then Halloween and All Saints' Day should have started in Celtic areas. But we've already seen that All Saints' Day was celebrated in Syria as early as 373 A.D, in Caesarea in 397 A.D., and in Constantinople (under Chrysostom—modern Istanbul) by 407 A.D. All Saints' Day, and Halloween didn't start in the Celtic countries. But it did take some time for the declarations of Rome to reach distant Celtic areas like Ireland.
2. In order for the Neopagan and Wiccan claim that Samhain is the origin of Halloween to be true the particular day chosen should have some significance to the Celts and Samhain. But here we run into some serious problems. According to the best sources, Samhain was a Lunar festival of harvest. That means that the day of Samhain can vary up to a month in difference from any Solar year day. Compare, for example, the wide variety of days upon which Easter can take place. When sources claim that Samhain was October 31 to November 1 in the modern Solar Calendar they are being dishonest and disingenuous. They are intending to deceive the reader. Due to the differences between lunar and solar dates, on the average Samhain would take place exactly on October 31st only once in about every 30 years. When the reader adds into this the fact that the Western Calendar changed over from the Julian to the Gregorian at different times in different places, the reader can better understand how artificial the Neopagan and Wiccan claims are about Samhain. The Christian Church didn't get Halloween/All Saints' Day from the pagans, the pagans are trying to claim that Christians stole from them. But the Neopagans and Wiccans cannot even get their calendars straight. And they are hoping that the reader doesn't notice how weak and embarrassing their claim is.
3. In order for the Neopagan and Wiccan claim that Samhain is the origin of Halloween to be true Samhain they should be able to prove that Samhain is older than All Saints' Day. But, in fact, the opposite is true. We have a manuscript from 843 A.D. where the Irish Christian Bishop Óengus of Tallaght wrote about the celebration of All Saints' Day. It was celebrated in the Spring of the year at that time and in that place. The Decree of Pope Gregory IV had still not reached Ireland so that All Saints' Day should be celebrated November 1st.

But the earliest-ever-mention of Samhain in Irish folklore doesn't come until the 10th Century (Ronald Hutton's 1996 book *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*). There is no mention of Samhain outside of Ireland until centuries later.

These, then, are the facts.

Samhain comes from the 10th Century A.D. and is a newer invention. All Saints' day is older than Samhain. All Saints' Day came from the practice of honoring the Christian Martyrs in Israel, Turkey, and Syria as early as the 2nd Century and later.

All Saints' Day and therefore Halloween originated outside the Celtic sphere of influence and had nothing to do with what the Neopagan and Wiccan claims are about its origin.

In fact, the newer holiday, called Samhain, was a Lunar holiday. This means that it could be celebrated on any of 30 or so days in Autumn of a given year depending on when the harvest moon was recognized in Ireland. And very, very rarely did this moon happen on October 31st. This simple truth cannot be emphasized enough.

Any book or website or article that claims that the ancient Celts celebrated Samhain on October 31 is perpetrating a lie. Modern Neopagans and Wiccans invented their own calendar through the 1970s and 1980s and they chose Oct. 31 to be the day for Samhain. It was a move on their part to put forward the false claim that Halloween started in paganism.

Why Would the Non-Christians Want to Undermine This Holiday?

All Saints' Eve (Halloween) and All Saints' Day have a special place in the commemoration of the Christian Church because of the Reformation. It was on October 31st, Halloween, that Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg, Germany. It was on that date he chose to challenge the corruption in the official church about the notion that salvation in Christ could be bought with money or works. All Saints are saved by Grace, through Faith, revealed by God's Word in Christ.

Halloween, October 31st is Reformation Day. On October 31, 1517 the Church of Christ began to return to the authority of Scripture alone over the traditions and will of man. It was the day that the Church began to return to salvation by Faith in Christ alone over the works of human will and deeds prescribed by humans. The day that the Church began to return to salvation by Grace alone, rather than the effort of the individual or that individual's reliance upon the efforts of the saints who had gone before him. It was the day that the Church returned to reliance upon Christ alone and not upon self.

It should not be surprising that Satan and the World have gone to such extremes to defile Halloween with anything that would distract Christians and the unbelievers from Sola Scriptura, Sola Fide, Sola Gratia and Solus Christus (Scripture Alone, Faith Alone, Grace Alone, and Christ Alone).

Halloween Traditions:

In this world some traditions have become the mainstay of Halloween. Though these traditions are not necessarily a problem by themselves, they have been claimed by the Neopagans and Wiccans as evidence that Christianity is a fraud and newcomer that has replaced the "Older" so-called "Truth". But they lie.

The Haunted House started in the early 1970s. The first records of Haunted Houses were from Cincinnati, Ohio where the Jaycees (Junior Chambers of Commerce) introduced the first Haunted Houses as a way to keep kids entertained on Halloween.

So which is older, All Saints Day starting in the 2nd Century or Haunted Houses starting in the 1970s?

Jack o'Lanterns are an American invention from the mid 1800s. Ireland and Britain had older traditions of carving vegetables into lanterns. But those traditions are not ancient. Historian David J. Skal writes:

Although every modern chronicle of the holiday [of Halloween] repeats the claim that vegetable lanterns were a time-honored component of Halloween celebrations in the British Isles, none gives any primary documentation. In fact, none of the major nineteenth-century chronicles of British holidays and folk customs make any mention whatsoever of carved lanterns in connection with Halloween. Neither do any of the standard works of the early twentieth century. (see this and other helpful references cited at *The Scoopie*)

It was in 1837 that the term "Jack o' Lantern" first appeared as a term for a carved vegetable lantern. Previously the term referred to the man or boy a town hired to keep the street lamps lit through the night. The pumpkin was used with the cornucopia as a fruit that was displayed throughout fall harvest time in America as a sign of God's providential blessing.

There is a lot of folklore about the Jack O'Lantern, but it is fakelore invented to create a fictional scary history for the Jack O'Lantern. But which is older? All Saints' Day or the Jack O'Lantern?

Trick or Treating is very popular in America and several other countries. In the Middle Ages (1300s to 1500s or so) there was a practice where children or the poor would go from door to door to beg. In some places these beggars would sing or perform in order to get gifts of money or food from householders. While this happened every day of the year, because these beggars had to eat every day, they were particular active on holidays. Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and All Saints' Day were special days when children and adults would go from home to home singing hymns and carols and begging. A good source for what these people would sing is the *Oxford Book of Carols*.

In Shakespear's 1593 play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* the character Speed accuses his master of "puling [whimpering or whining] like a beggar at Hallowmas." That's our All Saints' Day, November 1st.

Wearing costumes on Halloween is first known in Scotland in 1895 and in the United States in 1911. The earliest use of the words "trick or treat" is from 1927 in the United States. In the early 20th Century there were thousands of postcards made with Halloween themes, but none of them showed "trick or treating" until the 1930s.

So what is older? All Saints' Day or Trick or Treating?

Halloween, Reformation Day, All Saints' Day is a very special day of the year for the Christian Church. We commemorate all saints past, present, and future with the confession that we cannot save ourselves with our own works, no price we could ever pay would be good enough. But Christ has paid for the whole world. And all believers in Christ, and these are the Saints, will be raised on the last day to eternal life. Reclaiming Halloween means knowing where it comes from, why the day was established, and the historical significance it holds for the Christian Church. Satan and the world are always willing to undermine and steal anything that is of value to the confession of the truth of Scripture. Let us not fall prey to the lies.

Enjoy Halloween! Enjoy Jack O'Lanterns, Enjoy Trick or Treating. But confess the truth!

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