

# What about Halloween?

by Bob and Gretchen Passantino

*Halloween is the most dangerous day of the year -- when satanists and witches snatch children off the streets and sacrifice them in Satan's name!*

*Halloween is nothing but a secular time of fun and games -- an excuse for the kids to dress up and overload on sugar!*

These are only two of the comments Christians hear during October. There are many things about celebrating Halloween with which Christians are uncomfortable, such as images of ghosts, devils, and witches; and rumors of satanic rituals involving criminal and anti-Christian activities. However, most adults also have fond memories of childhood trick-or-treating and dressing up as a princess or super hero. So many traditions, myths, and unfounded rumors have developed about Halloween that it is a complex issue Christians should consider carefully.

## Origin

"Halloween" is a contracted form of "Holy Evening" and refers to the evening of All Saints Day (November 1), when Christians traditionally remember believers of other times who are especially good role models of faith; many of whom were persecuted, tortured, and/or died rather than renounce Christ. The Christian Church kept the Jewish custom of marking a holiday (contracted form of "holy day") for the twenty-four hours beginning with sundown and ending with sundown the following day. Even today Christmas Eve is almost as special as Christmas Day; and in Eastern Orthodox churches, the resurrection (Easter) is first celebrated on Easter Saturday at sundown. Another tradition the Church inherited from its first century Jewish roots was to divide each year into commemorative events, doctrinal remembrances, holidays or seasons so that, throughout the calendar year, the God's redemptive history would be recounted. This is called the "Church year" or "Church calendar." It took many centuries before most of the dates were standardized throughout the Church. Some Protestant churches today do not follow a church calendar except for Christmas, Easter, and perhaps Pentecost.

Frequently the Christian Church in an area deviated from a standard church calendar in order to directly challenge the popularity of a local pagan custom, event, or idol. For example, the Church in the Roman Empire chose December 25 to celebrate the birth of Christ in direct opposition to pagan Roman holiday activities of the season, including the worship of Saturnalia, which celebrated the sun god. Easter, celebrating the resurrection of Christ, corresponds to the historical time of the crucifixion and resurrection and to the end of the Jewish festival of Passover, in which God prefigured the coming sacrifice of Christ, the "Lamb" who was slain for the sins of the world. Pentecost, celebrated fifty days after the Jewish Passover, was a Jewish holiday commemorating the beginning of the harvest (the "first fruits"), thanking God for His blessings. When the Holy Spirit came on the disciples in Jerusalem on Pentecost in fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32 (cf. Acts 2:1-41), it marked the "first fruits harvest" of Jews, (and later, Samaritans and Gentiles) brought into the kingdom of God by the gospel preaching of the disciples (Matt. 28:19).

One of the biblical inspirations for honoring believers of past times and thanking God for their service in His Name comes from Hebrews 11:1-40. The writer of Hebrews encourages us that our faith is completely trustworthy because it is faith in God, who has proven His character and power so many

times in the past in the lives of others that we can be confident that He will accomplish whatever He has promised for the future. From this grew the idea of picking a special day during the church year on which to honor believers who were good role models of faith. This became known as "All Saints Day."

Although it marked a special day to honor believers of the past, there was no consistency in the dating of All Saints Day until Christianity began to flourish in northern Europe and the British Isles. There Christians found well-entrenched pagan harvest/winter festivals. One of the best known was called Samhain. They determined that All Saints Day should be celebrated at the same time to directly challenge the sentiments of pagan festivals of the season, including Samhain.

These harvest/end of the year holidays generally celebrated the end of the harvest, the beginning of winter, and death. Just as crops live and then die, just as the sun rules for a long time and then "dies" until it shines for only a short time during the day, so all humans and animals eventually die. One of the common pagan beliefs was that the spirits of those who died during the previous year could not go to their "final resting place" until they were properly prepared with possessions, wealth, food, and drink (either for themselves or to pay the god who ruled the next world). Until then, their spirits wandered where they had lived and died. A common pagan tradition was to placate the spirits and send them off on a one-way trip to the nether world by "treating" them. If a spirit was not "treated" well, it would "trick," or haunt, those who had neglected preparing it for leaving this world.

Fire became associated with the pagan holiday and often symbolized the power of the sun or as a defense against trick-bent spirits. Spirits were believed to assume grotesque appearances, and some traditions developed that if one could costume himself to look like a spirit (or at least not to look like the guilty relative who had neglected his departed loved one), then the spirits would not plague him. Some said the spirits could be warded off by carving a grotesque face into a gourd or root vegetable (the Scottish used turnips) and setting a candle inside it.

This was also the customary time for the pagans to use the occult practice of divination to determine the weather for the coming year, the crop expectations, and even who in the community would marry whom and in what order. "Bobbing for apples" is one practice the pagans used to divine the spiritual world's "blessings" on a couple's romance.

As northern Europe and the British Isles became Christianized, the Church saw that the pagan festivals still lured Christians to compromise their faith. Consequently, the Church in those areas designated October 31 and November 1 as the "Holy Evening" and Holy Day of All Saints Day. The Church not only sought to give Christians an alternative, spiritually edifying holiday; but also to proclaim the supremacy of the gospel over pagan superstition. There was no need to "placate" the spirits, or buy their way into the afterlife — eternal life is offered to all who believe in the atonement of Jesus Christ, who shed his blood to reconcile us to God and bring us eternal life. Rather than fearing the "tricks" of those who have died, Christians reflected on the lives and deaths of those who were faithful and used them as role models for their own walks with the Lord; and thanked God for preserving the saints in the midst of suffering and persecution.

In 1517, a monk named Martin Luther honored the faithful saints of the past by choosing All Saints Day (November 1) as the day to publicly charge the Church hierarchy with abandoning biblical faith. This became known as "Reformation Day," a fitting celebration of the restoration the same biblical faith held by the saints throughout church history.

Halloween didn't become an American holiday until the immigration of the working classes from the British Isles in the late nineteenth century. The mischievous aspects of the holiday attracted many American young people, who borrowed or adapted many customs without reference to their pagan origins.

Today Halloween is almost exclusively an American secular holiday. Most people who celebrate Halloween have no conception of its religious origins or its heritage of paganism. Most people perceive Halloween as a fun time to party, dress up in outlandish costumes, and eat and drink. Small children enjoy the costumed role playing (an important part of learning, as any preschool or kindergarten teacher can testify), games, and refreshments.

### **Unfounded Rumors**

It is not true that Halloween is the most important celebration for most contemporary satanists. Most contemporary satanists celebrate their own birthdays as their most important "unholi"-day, which is to be expected from adherents of a religion that is focused on self-worship, self-indulgence, and self-gratification. The actual incidence level of satanic-associated crime is very low, and on Halloween consists mostly of petty vandalism and desecration of graveyards and churches; satanic graffiti; raucous rituals including drug and/or alcohol use and sexual promiscuity; and very rarely sexual violence or animal killing. The most well-known documented criminal activity associated with Halloween are the "Devil's Night" fires that were rampant in the Detroit area. These destructive bonfires were not religiously inspired, but were a convenient excuse for out-of-control juveniles to act destructively, often in their own communities.

It is not true that satanists look for "Christian virgins" to rape during Halloween rituals. A young Christian is much more likely to be in danger of a drunk driver, or a party that gets out of hand with drug or alcohol use than of satanic abduction. Occasional anti-social, criminally committed individuals or small groups that also practice self-styled satanism commit crimes on Halloween, but they invariably betray a pattern of sociopathy at other times as well.

It is not true that poisoning or sabotaging of Halloween treats is a significant risk if parents take sensible precautions. Most horror stories are unsubstantiated rumors that quickly cross the country, gaining embellishments, and unnecessarily frightening parents. If parents are careful about restricting their children's treats to ones from people they know and trust, or from a formal program run by a church, community group, or merchant association, they should be fairly safe. In many communities, local hospitals and/or police stations will screen treats free of charge.

### **Christian Response**

Christians should evaluate Halloween and determine an appropriate response for themselves and their own families. Christians should refrain from any participation that would compromise one's faith or bring dishonor to the Lord Jesus Christ. A good principle is to look for ways to become a positive, Christ-honoring voice in the midst of secularism and paganism. Each Christian must be persuaded in his own conscience about how he approaches Halloween.

Some Christians decide to have absolutely no contact with Halloween. They have the legally protected right to keep their public school children from participating in any potentially spiritually compromising activity, such as listening to ghost stories, or coloring pictures of witches. They may decide to completely ignore the holiday, not answer their door to trick-or-treaters, and instead have a family evening watching Bible story videos or playing family games. Parents who choose this course need to explain to

their children why they have taken this stand, and give them strong encouragement, since their children will undoubtedly experience some teasing or ridicule from their friends and schoolmates.

Some Christians decide to have a limited, non-compromising participation in Halloween. Sometimes their activities can be creative and help to promote the gospel. One mother was planning to keep her son home from his public school's Halloween parade but he convinced her to let him go dressed as his favorite Bible character, David. He stood on the stage before his entire public school and told the story of how David trusted God and saved God's people from Goliath. Other families respond to trick or treaters by including a salvation tract with each treat. Many families restrict their children's trick or treating (this seems consistent with our continuing parental admonition "Don't take candy from a stranger!") and instead let them attend a community party or a party in the home of friends. Most Christian families restrict their children's costumes to exclude evil, pagan, or demonic costumes. Some insist on a biblical character's costume.

Some Christians decide to "overcome" the pagan and secular trappings of Halloween in a manner similar to the way the Church "overcame" pagan festivals with All Saints Day. Many churches have "Harvest Festivals," where children may dress as farm animals or farmers. Others host "Reformation Festivals," where children may dress as their favorite Bible character or as a figure from church history. Some churches sponsor "Hell Houses" for older children and teenagers where the gospel is preached as the way to avoid the horrors of eternal punishment. One church youth group has a costume party (no evil characters allowed) where participants play games and have contests as part of preparing food baskets for the needy. They ring the doorbells of needy people in their community and "treat" them with the anonymous food baskets (including a personal message with the plan of salvation and an invitation to church). (Good ideas are available in *Halloween Alternatives* by Louis Merryman, 627 N. Guadalupe Ave. #5, Redondo Beach, CA 90277.)

Regardless of the position you take regarding your family's response to Halloween, all Christians can rejoice that "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4); that we can "resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7); and that through the cross Christ has "disarmed principalities and powers," and "made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them" (Col. 2:15).