

Q. Should Christians participate in Halloween celebrations?

A. Halloween is celebrated on October 31, typically by children dressing in costumes and going house-to-house trick-or-treating (also called guising) and having parties. There is no "Thus saith the Lord" in the Bible concerning Halloween. But I do believe that it is possible to come to a conclusion about it that is in harmony with Scripture. When considering whether we should participate, we should ask ourselves some questions. 1. What are the origins of the day? 2. What do people think of the day today? 3. What Scriptures apply to the situation? Let's try to answer these questions.



1. What Are the Origins of Halloween?

What we call Halloween has its origins in several non-Christian festivals and rites. Chief among them is Samhain (pronounced sow [rhymes with cow] + in). Although there are various theories as to the origin of the name, it is generally accepted that it means "summer's end." Thus, Samhain was the last day of summer and the eve of winter, which was seen, especially by ancient people in far northern latitudes, as a cold, dark time through which many people didn't live. The History.com article "Ancient Origins of Halloween" (<http://www.history.com/topics/halloween>) reports, "Celts believed that on the night before the new year, the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred. On the night of October 31 they celebrated Samhain, when it was believed that the ghosts of the dead returned to earth." To avoid being recognized by the ghosts, people going out at night wore masks to make them look like fellow ghosts. Food was sometimes left on doorsteps to try to appease the spirits, or candle lanterns made from large turnips were carved with faces and put in windows to scare away the evil spirits. Obviously, we can see in these things the origins of wearing ghoulish costumes, trick-or-treating, and jack-o'-lanterns.

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The article cited above also tells us, "By 43 A.D., the Roman Empire had conquered the majority of Celtic territory. In the course of the four hundred years that they ruled the Celtic lands, two festivals of Roman origin were combined with the traditional Celtic celebration of Samhain. The first was Feralia, a day in late October when the Romans traditionally commemorated the passing of the dead. The second was a day to honor Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and trees. The symbol of Pomona is the apple and the incorporation of this celebration into Samhain probably explains the tradition of 'bobbing' for apples that is practiced today on Halloween."

In still another tributary that feeds into Halloween, we see that in A.D. 126, the Roman emperor Hadrian built the Pantheon in Rome (it replaced an earlier Pantheon commissioned by Marcus Agrippa that burnt down in A.D. 80). It was a temple dedicated to all gods. Centuries later, Emperor Phocas gave the building to Pope Boniface IV. In a move that altered the original intent of the Pantheon from honoring all gods to honoring of all Christian martyrs, Boniface dedicated the building on May 13, 609, thus beginning the Catholic feast of All Martyrs Day. Pope Gregory III (731–741) moved the day from May 13 to November 1 and made it an observance honoring all saints. In Middle English, All Saints Day was called "Alhallowmesse" or All Hallows Day. The day before was All Hallows Eve, which was contracted to Halloween. It was thus Halloween that took on the characteristics of Samhain and the Roman festivities, intermingling the old traditions associated with the dead with the Church's festival for dead saints.

In the New World, Halloween festivities were forbidden by Protestant-dominated colonies. It was, however, kept by some in the more Anglican southern colonies and in Catholic-dominated Maryland. But Halloween really got off the ground in America with the Irish potato famine of 1846. That began a massive wave of immigrants from Ireland who brought Halloween traditions with them. According to history.com, "Taking from Irish and English traditions, Americans began to dress up in costumes and go house to house asking for food or money, a practice that eventually became today's 'trick-or-treat' tradition. Young women believed that on Halloween they could divine the name or appearance of their future husband by doing tricks with yarn, apple parings or mirrors." Since then, Halloween has gone through several phases: a move to make it a more community-oriented day, the rise of a new tradition of vandalism on the day, efforts to make the day one of private family parties, followed by a return to the old Halloween traditions combined with multi-billion

dollar commercialism in the form of candy, costumes, and other paraphernalia. Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Wesleyan, and Lutheran churches continue to observe All Saints Day.



The celebration in Mexico is a good example of the syncretism of pagan and Christian traditions. In Mexico, November 1 and 2 are together celebrated as *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), *Día de los Difuntos* (Day of the Deceased), *Día de los Inocentes* (Day of the [dead] Innocents), the latter also sometimes called *Día de los Angelitos* (Day of the Little Angels). During these days, graves are cleaned and offerings of toys, trinkets, candy, and alcoholic drinks such as tequila are made to deceased relatives, with flowers used to attract the souls of the dead to the offerings. Figures of skeletons and skulls are commonly seen during the festival.

2. What Do People Think of Halloween Today?

What people think of Halloween varies from place to place. For the most part, it is now highly commercialized and for this reason is growing in popularity, even in countries where it was not originally celebrated. Most people see it merely as a sort of fancy dress party, especially for the kids. Modern costumes often concentrate more on film superheroes than symbols of the dead, but house decorations still show a good number of jack-o'-lanterns, witches in pointy hats, black cats (incidentally, the pagan belief was that witches could turn themselves into cats), skulls, and so forth. What trick-or-treating is done is now often with parents along for safety. And yet Halloween still often has a focus on the dead, sometimes depicting the dead as walking through the earth by Satanic powers, sometimes showing violence such as costumes portraying hideous and bloody wounds. Halloween has also become a time for theaters and television to show some incredibly violent horror films that often include Satanism, witchcraft, and sorcery.

Today, there are neoPagans, such as Wiccans and Reconstructionist Pagans, who celebrate Samhain. These people are in a small minority. Most people today ignore the fact that many of the symbols and practices of Halloween have ancient religious connotations. They do

not give Halloween a religious significance (although some see the day following, All Saints Day, as religious).

3. What Scriptures Apply to the Celebration of Halloween?

Halloween is not directly mentioned in Scripture. On the other hand, we can find principles that can apply to the situation.

Under the Old Covenant, God's instructions were clear: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18); and "There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee" (Deuteronomy 18:10-12). And the book of Jeremiah says to "Learn not the way of the heathen" (Jeremiah 10:2).

But what about in the New Testament? Galatians 5:20 lists "witchcraft" among the works of the flesh, and verse 21 says, "that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." The word translated as "witchcraft" is *pharmakia*. You will notice its similarity to our English words "pharmacy" and "pharmaceuticals." The connection is that the purveyors of witchcraft and sorcery commonly used drugs or potions to work their spells and in their rites. For example, witches' broomsticks were anointed with mind-altering drugs that entered the body through the skin and made the witch feel like she was flying. The reason witches are often shown as ugly crones is because the drugs and their lifestyle destroyed their health and their looks.

Revelation 21:8 says, "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers [*pharmakois*], and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death."

Now, bearing this in mind, let's notice an incident recorded in Acts 19:19: "Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver." Did the "curious arts" described in these books really mean anything, have any real power? No. Nevertheless, so willing were these people to entirely separate themselves from the dark works of paganism from which

they had been saved that they burned books worth a fortune. Ephesians 5:11 tells us to "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them."

But, of course, most people who celebrate Halloween aren't really witches and sorcerers. They are only doing it for fun. It is all just a make-believe, a lark for the kids, a show, a community party. As a Christian, you may say, "It has no meaning to me. So, what's wrong with it?"

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul is dealing with a touchy subject in the early church—whether Christians may eat meat that had been offered to idols. Apparently, the meat was served to the public in the temple of the idol (verse 10). It seems that it was common to eat in such places. This meat was esteemed by the pagans because it had been offered to the idol. But to the Christians, it presented a problem. The mature Christian would understand, as Paul teaches, that "an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one" (verse 4). But the weak Christian or seeker, whose mind is not fully cleared of his old pagan thinking, seeing his brother eating meat offered to idols, might be falsely or rashly emboldened to violate his conscience and eat the meat. This, Paul says, is ruinous to the weak brother's Christian growth or walk. Paul says this in verse 11, but the King James Version translation of this verse has a couple of problems. *The New Testament, An Expanded Translation* by Kenneth S. Wuest puts it well: "For the one who is weak, through your knowledge is being ruined [in his Christian life], your brother on account of whom Christ died." What is Paul's solution? "But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend" (verses 12-13). Or, as he says addressing the same topic again in 1 Corinthians 10, "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not" (verse 23).

Is it unlawful for Christians to participate in Halloween as mere childish fun? No, it is not unlawful. Is it expedient? I think that it is not. Why? Because Halloween is so closely associated with death and darkness and evil and paganism and everything that is not enlightened by the Gospel of Christ. It so often depicts all that is not true, not honest, not just, not pure, not lovely, not of good report, not virtuous, and not praiseworthy (see Philippians 4:8). By having anything to do with Halloween, we are in no way being the light to the world that Jesus said we are to be (Matthew 5:14).

The serious practitioners of paganism, witchcraft, sorcery, Satanism, or any other false religion are in the sad position of being unrepentant sinners who, as we have read, are excluded from the kingdom of God and instead will have their part in the lake of fire. Would it be right for us to imitate Buddhists or Muslims for a day? What about drunkards or prostitutes? Instead of emulating them for fun, they ought to be the objects of our pity and the focus of our evangelization. To imitate them in their sin for our own entertainment is incompatible with our calling.

We must also consider what sort of message we are sending to our children when we encourage them to keep an ancient pagan holiday by dressing as pagans or the spirits of the dead risen by the powers of darkness. Is it really right to have them roam the neighborhood extorting candy? Of course it's just in fun, but it is fun based on a very bad message. It is lawful, but I don't see how it is expedient. It is lawful, but it doesn't edify.

Well, that's my take on Halloween. We have never kept Halloween in our house, and it has never been a problem. In case you are wondering how to handle Halloween invitations or trick-or-treaters, here, for what it is worth, is my personal advice. If you decide not to keep Halloween, and you or your children are invited to a Halloween party, it is usually easy to turn down a Halloween invitation. I think this is because people don't associate it with Christianity or family dinners. "Thank you, but we don't do Halloween in our house," is usually enough of a response. If asked why, a simple, "We see it as contrary to our Christian beliefs," should do. What about trick-or-treaters coming to your door? Some people have tried handing out tracts made just for this purpose. I personally don't think that children disappointed about not getting candy will be receptive to a Gospel tract. The best thing, in my opinion, is to discourage them from coming at all. Certainly, don't decorate your house for Halloween in any way. Also, keep your porch light and all lights that show toward the street off. This will usually keep almost all trick-or-treaters away.

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