SHOULD WE AS CHRISTIANS CELEBRATE HALLOWEEN?

How to Eat with Sinners, Yet Without Sin.

The origin of Halloween

Halloween has its origins in the ancient Celtic festival known as Samhain. The festival of Samhain is a celebration of the end of the harvest season in Gaelic culture. Traditionally, the festival was a time used by the ancient pagans to take stock of supplies and slaughter livestock for winter stores. The ancient Gaels believed that on October 31, now known as Halloween, the boundary between the alive and the deceased dissolved, and the dead become dangerous for the living by causing problems such as sickness or damaged crops. The festivals would frequently involve bonfires, into which bones of slaughtered livestock were thrown. Costumes and masks were also worn at the festivals in an attempt to mimic the evil spirits or placate them.

In 609 AD, Pope Boniface IV instituted a day dedicated to Mary and to the church martyrs. The day he chose – May 13th – coincided with another pagan festival, the Feast of the Lemures, in which the malevolent and restless spirits were propitiated. Then in 731, Pope Gregory III moved the date to November 1st. In spite of the conjunction of dates and a common reference to the dead, what has come to be known as All Saints Day is not to be confused with Halloween. Depending on the groups that observe it, All Saints Day may involve any of the following: a commemoration of the martyrs of the faith; a commemorative vigil for the saints (Roman Catholic); a day dedicated to the memory of local believers who have passed away (Swedish Lutheran Church). In all these, it is a day of prayer, sometimes accompanied with fasting and in spite of the association that people sometimes make, it is not in practice associated with Halloween traditions such as trick-or-treating, costumes and the idea of warding off evil spirits.

Halloween was brought to North America by Irish immigrants.
The Jack-O’-Lantern

The carved pumpkin, lit by a candle inside, is one of Halloween's most prominent symbols in America, and is commonly called a jack-o'-lantern. Originating in Europe, these lanterns were first carved from a turnip or rutabaga. Believing that the head was the most powerful part of the body containing the spirit and the knowledge, the Celts used the "head" of the vegetable to frighten off any superstitions. The name jack-o'-lantern can be traced back to the Irish legend of Stingy Jack, a greedy, gambling, hard-drinking old farmer. He tricked the devil into climbing a tree and trapped him by carving a cross into the tree trunk. In revenge, the devil placed a curse on Jack, condemning him to forever wander the earth at night with the only light he had: a candle inside of a hollowed turnip. The carving of pumpkins is associated with Halloween in North America, where pumpkins were readily available and much larger, making them easier to carve than turnips.

Halloween Today

The celebration of Halloween in North America today involves both elements retained from its origins and differences.

The most prominent common element is a focus on evil. Whether it is ghosts, devils, books or movies, Halloween is the day to watch horror movies, tell scary stories and disguise in frightening beings. Although many people do not disguise in things of the kind, it is undeniable that this is the theme of Halloween.

Some families think of carving a pumpkin as a fun activity and the kids love to dress up, go out at night and get lots of candy. For these families, this may be the extent of Halloween celebration.

Other families make more of the evil theme of Halloween. Video and online stores will profusely advertise horror movies as a fitting activity for the night and it works. Beside telling ghost stories and
devising the scariest and goriest decorations and costumes possible, it is seen as a night to play around the ideas of ghosts, spirits and the devil. For this reason, pulling out the Ouija board can be seen as a really cool thing for teenagers to do on Halloween.

Although it is difficult to estimate how many of those there are and though many may not take them seriously, there are professed adherents of witchcraft and Satanism. They attach a special significance to Halloween as a celebration of evil. Some disturbing practices that have been documented in the media are related to these and others may or may not. They include: ritualistic sacrifices, cemetery ceremonies and prayers to the devil. Cases of rapes and poisoned treats may or may not belong there but it cannot be denied that there is no other night that has Halloween’s reputation when it comes to these kinds of disturbing things.

**Concerns for Christians**

There are a number of concerns and considerations that come to play in the question of whether it is permissible or not for Christians to celebrate Halloween.

Christians who have been exposed to the occult personally, generally take very seriously something like the activities that take place on Halloween. But they are not the only ones. Many Christians have serious concerns with the idea of participating in Halloween. These concerns include:

1. The fact that actual activities of Satanists focus on Halloween.
2. The fact that behind the scares of Halloween are reflected actual superstitions (for instance, numbers of people who are really scared of ghosts).
3. The tendency among many others to discount the reality of and danger brought by the existence and
activities of the devil and demons (the devil is seen as imaginary, like fairies, an elf or Spiderman).

(4) The idea that the devil and evil are somewhat cool to play with which encourages people to experiment with occult games and promotes a focus on death and gore as a cool sub-culture.

Some Christians however, may object that while these things may be true in some quarters, it is not for many and as far as they are concerned, it is mainly a fun family and community event. They are concerned that they would not be unnecessarily alienating their children from their friends. Some are also concerned that if Christians shun what does not need to be shunned, they would continue to perpetrate the idea that Christians are rigid, no-fun, self-righteous and actually not a part of the greater community.

**Frequently Proposed Solutions**

Perusal of articles in publications or on the internet, document the arguments that have been produced by Christians to discourage or on the contrary, allow participation in Halloween. It must be noted that even among Christians who participate, no one actually promotes Halloween as a community festival.

It has been proposed that as far as the Christians who are former members of the occult are concerned, their sensibility may be likened to that of those who would not eat meat sacrificed to idols in New Testament times (see Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8). In those days, the meat which was sold in the marketplace was routinely butchered in the temple of Greek deities. Some Christians believed they should not eat that meat because it had cultic associations, while others said that there was nothing magical to the meat and that they could eat what they bought at the marketplace. The apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, agreed that since idols do not represent gods that actually exist, there is nothing inherently spiritual to the meat and it may be eaten freely. But he also saw the vantage point of the converts from temple worship and explained that it was normal for
their conscience to object to this. He took seriously the stumbling block it could represent to such a person to see another Christian eat such meat. In the end, he advocated that it is better not to eat than to cause someone to stumble. He also said that “he who eats should not despise the one who does not and he does not should not judge the one who does”.

On the basis of these passages, it has been proposed that likewise, there should be liberty with regard to participation in Halloween and that there should neither be contempt nor judging. Advocates of the exercise of Christian liberty in this matter refer also to passages such as Colossians 2:20-23. In other words, their concern is that the shunning of Halloween actually turns out to be a religion-based approach to what it means to be a Christian.

The analogy of Christmas has also been proposed as a consideration to take into account in this discussion. One author points out that though we know that Christmas originally is and should be a Christian festival celebrating the Incarnation, but for many people who celebrate it, the religious symbols and stories from the origins of the feast are completely disassociated from their origins. For them, it has no spiritual meaning and influence. That author suggests that the same applies to the way most people regard Halloween.

Moreover, the observation is made that formerly pagan symbols are commonly used nowadays by Christians and even in churches because they are so totally disassociated from their former ritualistic connections. This would include the Christmas tree. Playing cards belong in there too (they were originally used for divination). There are indeed Christians who advocate rejecting all of these and think it wrong for Christians to celebrate Christmas the way most do.

Another approach is to participate in alternatives to Halloween such as a dress-up party in church for kids and youth or a “harvest celebration”.
A closer look at the issues

Let’s start with the question of liberty. It is always very important to handle the matter of Christian liberty with care and desire to practice it as it is defined for us in the scriptures. Indeed, in 1 Peter 2:16 is very clear on that point: “Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.”

In that regard, it is important to represent Paul’s teaching on the matter of eating meat sacrificed to idols fairly by mentioning also how he continued the discussion of this topic in 1 Corinthians 10:14-33. While he maintained the same practical advice he had mentioned earlier, it was with a warning that put limits on it. The warning was that while meat originally sacrificed to idols and then sold in the marketplace has no actual spiritual property that should prevent a Christian from eating it, on the other hand, if there is a cultic context to eating it, then it is demonic and believers should absolutely not eat of it.

Concerning Christmas, it is an interesting point that is made that there is nothing spiritual for many who hold a celebration for it. However, this does not settle the question because the Bible clearly indicates that while association with what is good does not make someone or something good, association with what is evil can in fact pollute and incur guilt (see Haggai 2:12-13). The Lord said that something merely external cannot make someone unclean (Mark 7:18-23) if it is not sinful (see 1 Corinthians 6:15-20; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1).

The question then is whether there is something spiritually wrong with participating in Halloween and if so, what is it?

When people play cards today, the overwhelming majority either do not know or don’t care that originally cards were used for divination. When they play, they don’t think at all about divination. The cards are made of paper and there is nothing magical in the symbols. This is why I think that there is no harm in playing cards.

When people observe Halloween today, it is clear to all that evil and gore are a major theme of it, whether or not one chooses to emphasize them or do away with them personally. How many unbelieving families choose to just focus on costumes and candies? It is hard to say. Typically, families with young children don’t want them to be scared and have nightmares at night. A Jack-o’-Lantern becomes like a craft activity: the pumpkin is carved, a candle is put in it, it glows in the dark and kids love
it just for that. However, in a number of other families, or often when it involves older kids and teenagers, there is no such restraint. The lantern is no longer just this cute carving. It is considered fun to make it as gross and gory as possible, for instance, by sticking a big knife in “the head” and putting some ketchup around “the wound”. Again, while it is impossible to tell how many people do this, it is rather common.

Among the older kids, teenagers and adults, it would also be commonplace to watch horror movies, dress up into something evil and scary, and for some, to play “spooky” games or “supernatural” (often occult) games. Our store displays and stocks certainly attest very clearly to that.

The problem then is not just with individual practice, but with the culture that Halloween promotes. Does Halloween promote a culture? Yes, it does. For instance, it legitimatises horror movies as a form of entertainment. What would you think if as part of a Halloween display, I put a baby doll on my lawn, chopped in the head with an axe and splattered ketchup around it? Most people would think it bad taste and shocking. Why? What if I printed a huge billboard poster of Freddy Krueger impaling one of his victims and put it as a display on my lawn? Anything wrong with that? Suppose that only adults or older kids “who can handle it” could see it, would it make it good and right? Should I leave it on as a decoration year round? Yet it has become a perverse form of entertainment (enjoyed by some Christians) to watch this kind of stuff and think it is cool. It is sick enjoyment to be involved in watching fantasies of human beings being chased after by deranged madmen or bloodthirsty, merciless creatures bent on destruction. Often there is in horror movies not just a question of life and death suspense (creature A is hungry, human being B is trying to escape). Notice that a grizzly bear hunting down a man stranded in the mountains would not be considered a horror movie. In order to be a horror movie, it must be particularly horrible and gory. The movie Jaws is based on an historical situation, but the “pleasure” is heightened by seeing people pulled down under the water, limbs chewed up and pools of blood bubbling up at the surface of the water (I watched the movie in my pre-Christian days). More than focus on gore, most horror movies make their characters to be the incarnation of evil. Part of the suspense of a horror movie is to appreciate just how evil the villain is going to be. Spirits, vampires and other demonic creatures are commonplace. Need I mention the effect of violence of the human mind and soul? The link between extremely violent video games and actual life rampages has been well documented
and so also that between pornography and assaults. It seems clear enough that this kind of things do not meet the criteria of Philippians 4:8 and Romans 12:2.

This is an important, if not the predominant part of the culture of what Halloween is about.

Moreover, Halloween is a celebration of a wrong and harmful view of evil, of the devil and of the occult. The original festival was animistic in its view of the spirit world. Most people who celebrate Halloween either don’t believe that there is anything to the devil and the spirit world or what they believe is akin to pagan superstitions. This is why pulling out the Ouija board is fun for many, because for some, it’s just a game, for others it’s interesting to ask some spirit out there whether so and so loves me, which numbers to play at the lottery or if there is any interesting message from the netherworld for me. If you work in a secular place, you know how many people read astrology and while they laugh at it, they regularly read and even act according to it (I sure hope you don’t!). They are influenced by an animistic view of the spirit world. According to this view, the spirit world (or paranormal) exists. It is not directly related to sin and we can manipulate and make use of it. But it’s not about the devil deceiving human beings who need to turn away from such things and to the Christ (Acts 19:18-19). On Halloween, the unbelieving world laughs at and plays with evil. It is all so contrary to the truth of the gospel and of the Cross. It is a proclamation of the world’s unbelief and paganism.

Should Christians quietly make their little personal modifications and join the party? Paul’s answer to the Corinthians was that you cannot personally claim that you are not involved like the others if the focus of the activity is wrong. He writes in 1 Corinthians 10:19-20 “Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons”. In other words, a Christian could not say (1) I don’t believe idols represent real gods; (2) I don’t believe that a temple actually houses a god; (3) I don’t worship false gods; (4) Therefore, it is okay for me to join a communal meal in a temple where others worship these gods and meet there because they think it is the house of a god as long as I don’t.

Interestingly, meals in temples played a significant social role in ancient Greek society. This was the social thing to do. I can see how a well-meaning Christian in those days might have seriously wondered: “Since
the Lord Jesus ate with sinners, I should go because this way I stay in touch with them and may even have the opportunity to witness”. Not showing up to these large communal gatherings would have been a very anti-social thing to do (it was in fact a common accusation against the first Christians). It would contribute to the idea that Christians are rigid, no-fun, self-righteous and actually not a part of the greater community. Very similar to the way we may think of Halloween, isn’t it?

But the Scriptures are clear: this would be going too far in identifying with one’s community. There is demonic involvement in these things.

Deuteronomy 18:10-14 tells us that the occult and interest in the spirit world are abominations to God. God wanted His people to have nothing to do with this.

The question is this: when you kid dresses up as Spiderman and goes trick-or-treating, does the unbeliever who opens the door think, “well, little Joe is not dressed like a ghost, that must mean that he and his family don’t actually endorse the general culture of Halloween”? It is unlikely that they would think that because even an unbelieving kid may dress up as Spiderman and then go home and watch a horror movie with his big brother. What they are more likely to not think is that little Joe and his family are different from others. If they know this family is Christian, they might think of them as pleasantly not as “closed-minded” as they may have thought. But then when this neighbour accompanies his kid to the next Christian family’s door and they are not dressed up and don’t hand out candies, they might think: all Christians should be like Joe and his family, not like these bigots. In fact, they would wish all Christians were “open-minded” not just on Halloween, but other issues on which they are seen as “stuck” such as homosexuality, evolution, abortion and euthanasia. Your neighbours really don’t mind you to be a Christian and do your little religious thing, as long as you play along with everyone else and don’t make a public stand for anything.

You see the problem? You may not intend anything more than giving your kid the opportunity to do some fun carving, play out at
night with friends and get lots of candies and perhaps no one will pay any attention to what you are doing. But what takes place is what so unfortunately takes place in so many areas of life: there is less and less difference between those who profess to follow the Lord and those who don’t. Whenever there is the potential for us to witness, we are not comfortable with the social implications of non-participation and we make our faith a private faith, with no public witness.

If Halloween became a feast with no focus on gore and evil, just making lanterns out of pumpkin, wearing harmless costumes and eating candies, I think it would be as fine to participate in it as it is to play cards. But such is not the case, whatever you choose to do or not to do: the celebration has a culture of its own and you cannot pretend that there is no public witness issue to your participation in it.

**The question of Alternatives**

Whether we should replace it with an alternative and how, is a more difficult question because this is not the kind of question that is easily answered from the scriptures from which we learn to make God-pleasing decisions.

Some suggest a harvest celebration. It usually is a church activity (like picking apples and enjoying a hay ride, dressed up in harvest-themed costumes). We already have a harvest-related festival: Thanksgiving. I don’t know whether Christians who do the harvest celebration are in fact verily celebrating the harvest or if that’s just a name. I have read about some that retain quite a few of the elements of Halloween: pumpkins and costumes. In and of itself, it is not wrong to do something with pumpkins and costumes on the same day as most of society does. But it needs to be clearly differentiated enough from Halloween that it does not appear to society as just a cover-up. It must also be clear that it is *not* Halloween that we celebrate and that we disapprove of it.
Some Christians raise the question: do we need to “compensate” our kids for renouncing celebrations that are tainted? It is an interesting question. We need to be careful to teach our kids that our citizenship is in heaven and that we need to learn to happily renounce advantages of this world for our Lord (Acts 5:41). In other words, while there is nothing necessarily wrong with the approach of giving to our children when we can, we need to be careful that they don’t think that being a Christian does not require sacrifices or that they end up looking forward to Halloween because this is when they get their candy and costumes too! We need to help our children understand at their level what is wrong with Halloween, be witnesses to their friends and be sad because of the wrong things that often take place on and are part of the culture of Halloween. Halloween is not a good and fun day.

I like the idea of not “taking advantage of” but rather seeing a positive redemptive opportunity in times like Halloween. Martin Luther used bar songs sung by drunkards and changed the words because they already knew the melody to make them into hymns of praise. It was a controversial move. However, there is in it the idea of 1 Peter 3:15-16 “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” I think in that respect, that a church activity for youth and children with a definite differentiation from Halloween can be really good. Often unbelievers are attracted to better alternatives when they are available. Often, they like to sit with those who don’t drink and swear. Unbelieving kids and youth may appreciate the difference of culture that there would be in a F.R.E.D night (Fun, Recreational, Entertaining, Dressup).

We may make it a true community event. In other words, instead of threatening people with tricks to get treats, give kids too much candy or just meet people you are not always sure are safe for a brief moment, how about spending time doing activities, having fun and doing things cleanly and within reason in a safe and loving environment?
I like the idea of doing it on a different day from Halloween to help differentiate and clearly identify it as an alternative. We must not be afraid to say that we do not approve of Halloween. If the alternative event is held before, it is even better because the kid or youth who has been impressed by the differences as being better, might lose interest in Halloween itself and that would be a good thing.

I think it would be great to do something for adults too! We could do before Halloween, a Fall Carnival party at the church (or in a community hall), inviting people from the community. We could put on costumes (carnivals are fun) but would need to not allow Halloween type of costumes (nothing inappropriate or scary) in order to differentiate the culture of our party. We could have coffee and goodies and watch a good, clean and fun movie. It does not need to be churchy. In fact, if it is not, it might be better because it would show to society that even if they don’t want to become Christians, clean and safe fun really is better. There is definitely something to be said for not just be known for what we are against (the occult, gore, kids up to no good) but what we are for (responsible, clean, safe, family and community fun).