

All Saints' Day—a Christian Counterpoint to Halloween and Secularization

All Saints' Day falls on November 1st in our church calendar. The origins of this holy day go back to the Early Church's practice of commemorating the death of Christian martyrs. By the 3rd century, because the number of martyrs was so great and the identity of many unknown, it was more practical to establish a single day for the commemoration of all martyrs.

All Saints' Day was first set on May 13th in the West. After Christianity spread to the British Isles, the holy day was moved to November 1st, apparently to coincide with the celebration of Samhain, the Celtic New Year. The placement of All Saints' Day with Samhain was logical since one of the primary elements of Samhain was remembrance of the year's dead.

Later, in the fourteenth century, the Roman Church added another church holiday, All Souls' Day. It was observed on November 2nd. Whereas, All Saints' Day was set for the commemoration of martyrs, All Souls' Day was for the commemoration of all the departed believers. All Souls' Day also accommodated the Catholic doctrine of purgatory and the practice of praying for the souls of dead Christians trapped in purgatory.

Lutherans rejected the doctrine of purgatory because of its unscriptural grounds. Following the Reformation, All Souls' Day was dropped from the Lutheran calendar and both Christian martyrs and other former saints are remembered on All Saints' Day.

The Purpose and Message of All Saints' Day

The primary purpose of the church calendar is to remember the life of Jesus and significant events in church history. It began with the observation of Easter and Pentecost and gradually developed to include other events from the life of Jesus and the church.

In some cases, the dates of Christian holy days were fixed as a counterpoint to pagan holidays. Christmas and All Saints' Day are two examples of this. In doing so, the Church sought to give believers an alternative holiday, one that would focus on salvation history and the message of the gospel rather than pagan worship and superstitions.

The message of All Saints' Day is the message of victory over death through trust in Christ's grace and mercy. The Bible itself gives us a good example of how we ought to remember the former saints in the Letter to the Hebrews. The author lists many former saints, a "cloud of witnesses," and reminds us of the faith by which they "obtained a good report" (Heb. 11). This message was obscured under the cult of saints that had developed in the medieval church. The Reformation again sounded the true message of All Saints' Day.

The Augsburg Confession states: "It is also taught among us that saints should be kept in remembrance so that our faith may be strengthened when we see what grace they received and how they were sustained by faith. Moreover, their good works are to be an example for us, each of us in his own calling... However, it cannot be proved from the Scriptures that we are to invoke saints or seek help from them. 'For there is one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus' (1 Tim. 2:5), who is the only saviour, the only high priest, advocate, and intercessor before God (Rom. 8:34). He alone has promised to hear our prayers.

More- over, according to the Scriptures, the highest form of divine service is sincerely to seek and call upon this same Jesus Christ in every time of need. ‘If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the father, Jesus Christ the righteous’ (1 John 2:1)” (Augsburg Confession: Article XXI).

The Connection between All Saints’ Day and Halloween

In North America, the secular holiday of Halloween coincides with All Saints’ Day. In fact, Halloween takes its name from All Saints’ Day, which was earlier called All Hallow’s Day. Because Christians have traditionally observed holy days from sundown on one day until sundown the following day, it has become common to begin the observation of the holy day on the preceding evening, thus our Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve observations. The evening before All Hallow’s Day was called All Hallowe’en and eventually Halloween.

It is both unfortunate and ironic that while the name Halloween has its roots in the Christian tradition, the Christian element has largely disappeared and the pagan traditions and the commercial aspects prevailed in the observation of the holiday.

The History of Halloween in America

The seeds of our Halloween tradition arrived with Irish immigrants in the late 1840s. In recent decades Halloween has become a major holiday and retail event, trailing only Christmas in terms of consumer dollars spent.

A component of pranks and mischief has always been associated with Halloween. It has come from the traditions of Samhain. The Celts had a highly structured social order that was typically relaxed during the Samhain celebrations. This allowed the powerless majority to engage in mischievous pranks and petty vandalism without consequences. The tradition of mischief and pranks has prevailed in our own era. Periodically, the vandalism and pranks become more mean-spirited resulting in the costly destruction of property and cruelty to animals. One of these more destructive phases occurred during the 1970s. Communities and groups have responded by trying to organize safer, more constructive alternatives.

In the 1970s, the conduct of some Christian youth at Halloween caused concern in God’s kingdom. This concern led to heightened discussion of Halloween. It appears that many believers had participated in the secular Halloween traditions for years without giving the issue much consideration. The roots and nature of Halloween were more closely examined and discussed among believers.

The Dark Side of Halloween

Many Halloween symbols and traditions are associated with mischief, divination, death, evil, and the powers of darkness. They include ghosts and goblins, trick or treating, witches, black cats, bats, goblins, jack o’ lanterns, skeletons, ghosts, evil spirits, and demons. Because the Celts passed on their history orally, written records do not exist and it is not possible to fully determine the origin or development of all of these symbols and traditions.

In the modern era, most people do not take the various myths and legends associated with these symbols and traditions seriously, dismissing them as superstitions and folklore. For years the context of earlier pagan worship and the occult weakened in society’s collective awareness. During the last fifty years,

however, there has been resurgence in a wide range of pagan religions including neo-paganism and Satanism. These groups have been accused of animal and human sacrifice, sex and drug orgies, and the like, especially in connection with Halloween. Generally, these groups deny these accusations, and it may well be that they are inaccurate or exaggerated—at least where most of these groups are concerned. On the other hand, many neo-pagans readily acknowledge that Halloween is for them a day when they worship their gods and goddesses, and practice necromancy and divination.

Whether or not the darkest and most extreme charges directed at witches and Satanists are accurate or not, their beliefs are clearly contrary to the teachings of God’s Word and Christian faith. With the resurgence of pagan religions and the incidents of vandalism and destruction, Halloween lost much of its innocence. In recent decades, many religious groups began to re-evaluate their stance on Halloween.

Living Christianity’s Position

As a result of the Halloween discussions in our American Zion, the then AALC Work Committee wrote a letter to member congregations in October 1980 that summarized the understanding that the discussions had produced. There was widespread agreement about the need for watchfulness in Halloween observances. The pagan connections and dark components of Halloween were disturbing and worrisome. Believers wished to heed the scriptural admonitions to avoid the appearance of evil (1 Thess. 5:22).

Establishing the “distinctions of Christian soberness” was more difficult. The Work Committee noted that a zealous and restrictive attitude at work on the one hand, and leniency and fleshly tendencies on the other, made finding solutions more difficult. The understanding that emerged was “that we abstain from participating in the ‘traditional’ celebrations of the worldly Halloween, not only on the basis of its pagan mixtures, but even more because of the evil excesses now associated with its observance.” Two issues that were frequently discussed were trick or treating and school Halloween festivities. Questions on these two issues have resurfaced from time to time.

The October 1980 letter did not specifically address trick or treating. It fell under the general statement regarding traditional celebrations, their pagan mixtures and associated excesses. The understanding emerged that believing homes would not send their children out to participate in the traditional trick or treating. God’s children have endeavored to follow this understanding since then. When unusual or exceptional situations arise, it is hoped that Christian freedom would prevail. Here, too, believers want to be mindful of the dangers of both over-watchfulness and leniency. Above all, it is important that Christian love not be broken.

The 1980 letter did address school Halloween issues. It pointed out that because holidays, including Halloween, are a part of our culture, Christians have not objected to instruction within this cultural context. Neither have they found reason to oppose or abstain from such instruction or activities unless they are contrary to faith and good conscience. While occasional concerns with regard to Halloween movies, some party activities, or objectionable costumes remain, it appears that school issues have become less difficult in recent years since many school districts have scaled back or modified their Halloween festivities in response to concerns from churches in general.

In recent discussions about Halloween, the LLC Work Committee reviewed the October 1980 Work Committee letter and whole-heartedly supported the spirit of the letter and the positions it presented.

Do We Celebrate the Christian or the Secular?

In its October 1980 letter, the Work Committee suggested that congregations schedule song services, Bible class, or services in order to establish a wholesome Christian alternative for our youth and children. The desire was to focus attention on the Christian holiday rather than the secular, that is, on All Saints' Day rather than Halloween. It was clear then, as it is now, that if the focus were placed on All Saints' Day most of the Halloween related concerns and questions would dissipate.

In a world that is increasingly battered by secularism, the need for Christian toe-holds increases. Consider the changes wrought by secularization since 1980: prayer is now forbidden in public schools; countless stores remain open on Sundays; plaques, emblems, and monuments containing biblical quotations are being removed from government buildings and property; an effort is being made to remove "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance; and the traditional Christian view of marriage and human sexuality is ridiculed and challenged.

The Christian calendar provides toe-holds that families and individuals can cling to in the face of secularism's onslaught. The events of the Christian calendar provide opportunities to carve moments from daily life for the purpose of turning our attention to life's most important matter.

The message of All Saints' Day stands in contrast to the message of the secular Halloween. It gives us comfort and hope in the darkness of this world and the struggle against our own sin-corruption. The victory of the former saints and their experiences assure us of God's help in the midst of trials and suffering, of His grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, of our Savior's victory over the powers of darkness, and of His promise of eternal rest and peace to those who believe.

Jon Bloomquist

The Voice of Zion, October 2004