

Better than Halloween

Bright alternatives for churches and children

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Foreword

As a bishop, I am often asked what I think of trick-or-treat, or Halloween generally. As Halloween has become one of the great commercial success stories of the last few years, this question has come more frequently. Christian parents are rightly worried about possible connections between Halloween and various occult practices. Young people increasingly feel pressurized by their friends to join in with trick-or-treating, and the sale of Halloween-associated merchandise is now second only to Christmas decorations in the league of 'religious' festivals. Elderly people are also concerned about the increase in intimidation and violence connected with trick-or-treat calls.

I am not one for banning children from having fun. Christianity needs to make clear its positive message for young people – that Christ brings meaning and joy to their lives. And for many centuries there has been a positive Christian slant on Halloween. Eight hundred years ago the pagan autumn festival in Britain was christened *Halloween* – the holy night of blessing before All Saints' Day. I believe it is high time we reclaimed a Christian stake in this night. It can be a night of light and joy and hope, expressing the confidence we have in Christ who is the light of the world. So when I am asked, 'Should we ban Halloween for Christians?' My answer is 'No – let's re-christen Halloween!'

Better than Halloween will help us to do just that – it suggests approaches and ideas that are both biblical and child-centred. I hope that many more churches will take confidence from these, and begin a new wave of re-christening the occasion to become a positive opportunity for Christian outreach.

David Gillett
Bishop of Bolton

Introduction

It would be difficult to miss the hype and commercialization surrounding Halloween, 31 October. The media focus on it, and shops increasingly fill their shelves with items that are scary, frightening, and therefore very attractive to children. Many parents are willing to go along with all the trappings of Halloween by providing parties and encouraging the practice of trick-or-treat, but there are Christians and others who have concerns about aspects of the celebration.

There is a wide range of opinions on Halloween.

'It's a bit of fun, and brightens up the autumn.'

'It has become too commercial, and is used as a marketing opportunity.'

'The world is dark enough already – why focus on the darkness?'

'Halloween is frightening and scares children.'

'There's nothing wrong with kids dressing up and enjoying themselves.'

'It's a Pagan festival, nothing to do with our Christian roots.'

'It intimidates and frightens the old and the vulnerable.'

'The symbolism of Halloween can affect kids deeply.'

The purpose of this book is to help churches to look at the issues, learn where Halloween has come from, and do something about it by providing alternative activities. The book will give resources to the whole Church to reclaim the All Saints' celebration and to share the light of Christ in the community.

The book is in three sections.

Section One outlines the origins of Halloween and considers why Christians should not celebrate it. It gives reasons why Christians should try to reclaim Halloween as a celebration of the light of Christ.

Section Two provides all you will need for planning and running an alternative 'light' or 'bright' party for children on Halloween. It includes practical planning sheets, full guidance on child protection and health and safety issues, and suggestions for craft activities, talk outlines and songs.

Section Three includes the following supporting resources: fun sheets, posters, party invitations, a leaflet to be given to children, a pew leaflet for adult church members or to be given away on the doorstep, plus sheet music for original songs.

Most of these resources are also available in colour to be downloaded from the CD-ROM.

Additional sources of help and information are listed at the end of Section Three.

How to use the CD-ROM

Running the CD-ROM

Windows PC users:

The CD-ROM should start automatically. If you need to start the application manually, click on Start and select Run, then type d:\bth.exe (where d is the letter of your CD-ROM drive) and click on OK. The menu that appears gives you access to all the resources on the CD. No software is installed on to your computer.

Mac users:

The CD-ROM should start automatically. If you need to start the application manually, click on the CD icon on your desktop.

Viruses

We have checked the CD-ROM for viruses throughout its creation. However, you are advised to run your own virus-checking software over the CD-ROM before using it. Church House Publishing and The Archbishops' Council accepts no responsibility for damage or loss of data on your systems, however caused.

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Resources

The resources on the CD require Adobe Acrobat Reader for display and printing. If Acrobat Reader is already installed on your computer, it will be loaded automatically whenever required. If you do not have it, you can install Acrobat Reader by downloading the Reader from www.adobe.com. The 'Sample letter to the local press' and 'Sample text for a church or pew leaflet' are also available on the CD as word documents so that they can be adapted to your own situation.

Error messages

You may receive the error message, 'There is no application associated with the given file name extension.' If you are trying to read one of the resources, you should install the Adobe Acrobat Reader and try again.

SECTION ONE

Halloween traditions and history

The traditions associated with Halloween and their links with Druid and Celtic festivals are widely debated in books, in articles and on the Internet. There is little doubt that Halloween has roots in pre-Christian times, and it may also be a focus for present-day witches and Satanists. The traditions seem to draw on a number of sources, and the origins are therefore not clear-cut. But the debate rages on. . .

The name of the festival comes from 'All-Hallows' Eve', 1 November being identified by the Christian calendar as All Saints' Day. When Christianity spread throughout Britain the Church chose to adopt for some of its festivals dates that were already in use by the pagan Druids, and 1 November was the celebration of Samhain, lord of the dead. It was thought that on the evening before this celebration the barriers between life and death came down, and evil spirits roamed free. Celts lit bonfires, sang and danced in order to keep those souls away. The date also marked the beginning of winter and the start of the Druid year. But, despite the efforts of Pope Gregory IV in 835 – and of many others – to make and keep All Saints a Christian festival, the pagan elements of All Hallows' Eve have not gone away.

All Saints and All Souls

The Christian All Saints' Day on 1 November was and is a celebration of life, remembering both those who have served others and the Church in the past and Jesus himself, who brought light into the world to defeat fears and darkness. Sometimes known as All Hallows, meaning roughly 'All Holy People', it is a time to remember all the unnamed saints who do not have a saint's day of their own. The following day, All Souls, is sometimes called 'The Day of the Dead'. This is a day to remember all people who have died, whatever sort of lives they led. It is a happy occasion on which to think back on good times and to pray for the souls of those who have died.

Customs and traditions

The most obvious elements of Halloween, as it is celebrated in the USA, the UK and elsewhere, are based on various pagan rituals, some of which can be traced far back into the past.

Witches' masks and costumes are all linked with witchcraft, the occult, and Druid worship. There are those who argue that Halloween is the highest Satanic festival of the year, and who believe

that under the cloak of the 'fun' aspects promoted to children the 'forces of darkness' are at work. Many others are concerned at the focus on a pre-Christian festival.

Other costumes (e.g. ghosts and monsters) are an important part of the modern Halloween celebration, and may also have pagan origins. Some think that, in order to be safe from the ghosts and evil spirits that roamed the earth on the feast of Samhain, it made sense to some people to dress up as ghosts or monsters themselves. Then the ghosts and monsters would think they were some of their own!

Pumpkins may be linked with witchcraft through the tradition of putting a candle in a skull to light the way to witchcraft meetings. The use of pumpkins themselves seems to be a relatively recent American addition – in the past, in the UK, turnips and other root vegetables were used for the same purpose.

The use of *lights and fire* is directly related to the Samhain celebration, as people lit fires to scare away the evil spirits. In more recent history the focus on fire has moved a few days into November, when on 5 November bonfires are lit to remember the Gunpowder Plot.

Feasts and parties were an integral part of the Samhain celebration, as the summer ended and the darkness of winter began. People thought that by being together and celebrating life they would keep the evil spirits at bay.

The *trick-or-treat* habit has a number of possible roots and is likely to be a combination of all of them. It may go back as far as the ninth-century Christian tradition of 'souling', when throughout Europe people would visit homes and offer to pray for the souls of those who had died, and in return would be given a cake.

In England there was a medieval 'Mischief Night' on 4 November, when young people would play tricks on others. The tradition of Mischief Night continues today in some parts of northern England, including Yorkshire.

In the USA, where the more recent rise in the popularity of Halloween originates, the trick-or-treat habit seems to date back to the early twentieth century, when a large group of Irish labourers threatened people on Halloween night in order to obtain money. This has since been toned down and is now seen in much of the United States as a light-hearted community activity.

Apple bobbing, the game where participants must pick apples from a tub of water using only their mouths, may date back to Roman times. The Romans celebrated the goddess of fruits and fruit-trees, named Pomona, at around the same time of year as the Druid Samhain. When the Romans came to Britain the game was absorbed into that celebration, and later into Halloween.

Halloween and Christians

There is a wide diversity of opinion on Halloween, both within the Church and in wider society (see p. vi). Many Christians and churches have a feeling that there is something inherently wrong about the celebration, but are unsure why it is not healthy, wholesome or positive. Others view it as a commercialized American import, and do not see any great harm in it. The differing stances are often backed by good arguments, but we have to face the reality of the situation: Halloween is

growing and is no longer a Christian festival. As Christians we have a challenge in communicating our concerns to a world that does not take matters of spirituality – let alone occultism – seriously, or where a New Age ‘anything goes’ attitude prevails. Christians must avoid being seen as boring killjoys, yet should be clear about what may be dangerous or unwholesome.

So here are some reasons why Christians should reclaim Halloween:

Reclaiming our celebration

As Christians we are faced with alternatives: to ignore Halloween altogether; to go along with it without making any comment or protest; or to reclaim the festival for ourselves. As already discussed, the name Halloween comes from ‘All Hallows’ Eve’ – the night before the Christian festival of All Hallows or All Saints, which since the eighth century has been celebrated on 1 November. It was the Christians who adopted the celebration of All Saints at the same time as the Celtic start of winter, based on the fact that through Jesus, the light of the world, all darkness is banished. All Saints should be and can be a celebration of good over evil, recognizing the power and authority of Jesus, surrounded by his saints and followers of all ages. We no longer live in a pagan age when occult and druidic practices dominate and have a place – we have been introduced to Christ, and our society should therefore be different. It is surely right that we stand up for the power and Lordship of Christ, and celebrate that rather than the secular and somewhat sinister myths of earlier generations.

Light is better!

There is certainly a morbid fascination in darkness, death and fear that is attractive to children. The young do need to know something of evil in order to understand that good also exists, and they must at times be exposed to death in order to understand that we are all physically mortal. There are those who would argue that Halloween is a good opportunity for children to be gently introduced to the darker side of life in an atmosphere of fun and celebration.

However, I would counter-argue that children are better served by having the realities of life and death carefully explained to them and dealt with when the opportunity arises, rather than by trivializing the power or strength of evil. Children live in a hard world, where there are many things that cause them pain and put them in danger. The society we have created is a difficult place for children, and there is enough darkness and evil to be going on with. Light is better for children.

We should take the opportunity to celebrate light: both the light and colour in the world that make it open, good and bright, and the light of Christ, who brings light to the dark places. The light of Christ shines on our world, helping children understand that Jesus cares about the darkness of pain and suffering, including that in their own lives.

Fear or love?

As Christians we should be thinking about what motivates us, and what we stand for in our world. We have the spirit of love and all the attributes associated with love that we read about in 1 Corinthians 13. Love conquers fear, and love defeats hatred and pain. The secularized

Halloween does not remember and celebrate those who have brought the love of Christ to the world in the past, but revels in fear and horror. While for many the 'fear' at Halloween is sanitized and shallow, for others Halloween is a reminder of the unknown and dark: the evil that we cannot see. It is not God's will that anyone should live their lives in fear, or that fear should be an element in the lives of Christ's followers. Why then support – or be ambivalent towards – a festival based on fear and horror, superstitions of an earlier age before the love of Christ was known and shared?

The problem with trick-or-treat

Many churches and communities in Britain are becoming increasingly concerned about the potential for anti-social behaviour and criminal activity under the cloak of trick-or-treat. For example, in Stoke-on-Trent the Saltbox Christian Centre has been very successful in leading campaigns against the practice, and has worked with the local education authority and the police in the process. It produces useful resources to help others to carry out similar local campaigns. (For contact details see the resources list at the end of Section Three.) While the background to the tradition may have had Christian roots in the custom of 'souling', the current practice is far from good or helpful.

In essence, trick-or-treat is demanding money with menaces, a practice which is a criminal offence and should not be condoned. While it may appear innocent to go around local streets ringing doorbells and asking people for sweets, treats or money, some people can feel scared or intimidated by the practice. Because of rising juvenile anti-social behaviour, householders can be put in fear of intimidation and of vandalism to their property if they refuse to 'play'. Each year there are many anecdotal accounts of windows, doors and cars being damaged and people being put in fear.

The practice of trick-or-treat also puts children in danger, even if they go around in small groups. Many parents who would normally keep a careful watch on what their children do and where they go allow children to wander around the streets, calling at strangers' homes and asking for things. Other adults accompany their children to keep them safe, a practice that can itself add to the intimidation felt by those put under pressure to offer a treat or face the consequences.

Those who criticize trick-or-treat are often condemned as killjoys who are stopping others having fun. But we need also to ask: who has the 'fun' in this context? Is it fun for the Christian who refuses to take part and is insulted and threatened by the adult with the child? Or for the elderly person who keeps answering the door to people dressed in frightening and bizarre costumes who demand that they hand things over or face a shocking trick? Community 'fun' must be for all people, not just for a few. This relatively new, imported element of Halloween is at best an irritating nuisance; at worst it becomes criminal harassment and extortion.

Cutting commercialism

In the USA Halloween is the second most popular public holiday, a huge amount of money being devoted to decorations, costumes and food. In the UK, as we have noted, Halloween seems to become more commercial every year. In addition, while large organized bonfire events

around 5 November are still popular, there seems to be a decrease in families remembering the Gunpowder Plot by burning an effigy of Guido Fawkes. With the two celebrations being so close together more people are being drawn in by the commercial pressure of Halloween.

We must not fool ourselves – there is something attractive to children about witches' costumes and devil outfits, and it takes a supreme effort for parents to stick to a firm 'No' when trying to navigate children past the shelves and shelves of such items in supermarkets. In the same way that Christmas has been taken over by items and attractions that have nothing to do with Christ being born, so Halloween has been absorbed into our materialist world. The ever-increasing profile of Halloween puts pressure on individuals to go along with the crowd. Within that situation the truth of the light of Christ and the celebration of All Saints is lost, and the sinister and worrying aspects of Halloween are trivialized and hidden under cheap plastic horns and tacky outfits.

Celebrating the occult, Satan and evil

It could not be argued from any viewpoint that Halloween does not have origins in pre-Christian worship linked with the occult. The question that we must face as Christians is: does that matter? If we are clear that Christ is the light, then surely it can do no harm to us to see Halloween celebrated?

Yet the Bible is very clear about many areas of activity associated with the origins of Halloween, such as sorcery, witches, witchcraft, incantations and spells. It talks in vivid terms about the inability of good and evil to coexist and live in harmony and condemns those who underestimate or follow the evil one, Satan. Our concern is not only for those of us who live in the light of Christ, but for everyone who may come under evil influences, particularly children and the young.

There is an increasing interest in the occult, demonstrated by the popularity of books, films and computer games with storylines and examples of occult worship and practice. Through the internet information and help in learning about the occult is much more readily available, posing dangers similar to those we are more aware of concerning child abuse and grooming. Halloween is a danger to children and to others who dismiss it as a simple 'bit of fun', because it both trivializes the power of evil and distorts the truth. Halloween is in essence a celebration of evil over good; it can cause children to develop fears and become over-sensitive to the strength and influence of what we see as a defeated power. This distortion can manifest itself in fears of the dark, nightmares and horrific dreams, and a negative sense of their own vulnerability in a dangerous and dark world.

As Christians we may have concerns that children who are attracted to the darker side of Halloween will be drawn in to a fascination with the occult. The use of ouija boards and tarot cards is commonplace in many schools, leading children to play around with things that can become bigger and more sinister than they can cope with.

Ultimately, our view on this issue boils down to how we personally perceive the spiritual battle we are engaged in as Christians. There are a range of views within the Church, from those who see the devil around every corner at one extreme, to those who downplay biblical teachings

about evil and question the existence of Satan at the other. The concern of many is that by condoning the Halloween celebrations, which hark back to a previous age and understanding, we open up the young – as well as adults – to unhelpful thoughts and ideas and deny our calling to share good news and to bring light into darkness.

What does the Bible say?

The Bible has plenty to say about many of the activities and images associated with the modern Halloween. These passages and summaries could be used in sessions with children, young people, youth groups, home groups and the whole Church to open up debate and consideration of what Halloween is all about. The leaflet master on pages 47–48 will also help to communicate concerns about Halloween.

There is no doubt that most of the occult practices we know today, along with fortune-telling, astrology and spiritualism, have been around at least since biblical times. These practices are condemned in the Bible, but never trivialized: the Bible writers make it clear that sorcery and divination in all its forms is real, dangerous, and not compatible with a life following God.

Some questions to consider alongside the Bible passages that follow:

- Does the passage condemn the practice?
- Does it trivialize the practice?
- What does it have to say to us as followers of Christ?
- What does it say about what we ignore, condone, or stand against?

2 Corinthians 6.16

What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.

What we do about Halloween or other things in society that are so obviously against God's plan says a great deal about the people we are. If we join in – or even condone – Halloween, we are trying to have it all, but end up with nothing. As living temples we must be different.

Deuteronomy 18.10–11

Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practises divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead.

This unequivocal passage highlights what God finds acceptable and unacceptable. There can be little doubt that Halloween traditions have their roots in many of the practices mentioned here, and it is alleged that Halloween is a prime time for people to engage in those activities.

This verse covers a number of issues, including the practice of child sacrifice in some primitive religions. It tells us to keep away from these activities.

Ephesians 6.11

Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

The clear suggestion here is that the devil is real, and that evil can influence us. We are to protect ourselves by trusting in God and making sure that we are strong enough to repel all evil. It may be easier to cast our worries about Halloween aside, but we are reminded that evil is real and that to underestimate its power is dangerous.

Acts 19.19

A number who had practised sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.

Those who converted to Christ and joined the growing ranks of the Early Church had to make a clear break with the things of the past. It is significant that the burning of sorcerers' scrolls is mentioned in particular, highlighting that destruction was the only way to be rid of these items, however high the cost. It would be wrong to keep them, to sell them, or to pass them on – they had to be destroyed.

Leviticus 19.31

Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the Lord your God.

The temptation, even for God's chosen people, to turn to others for guidance must have been prevalent for this rule in Leviticus to be written. It is made clear that not only is it wrong to turn to spiritists and those who claim to be able to tell the future, but it is damaging too. Being involved in these things means that spiritual damage is caused, and our spirits are defiled.

John 8.12

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

Jesus brings light into darkness, clarity to the confused, and right where there is wrong. Those of us who walk in the light of Christ should avoid all things that can lead us into darkness and help others to avoid them too. As Christians we can and should share that light with others, and bring light to the dark things of life.