

# Trick or Treat:

## What's Halloween About?

### *Introduction*

This week we will look at the holiday and celebration that occurs at the end of October – Halloween. This is the second largest holiday, after Christmas for its commercial impact in the United States. As you walk around shopping areas you will see the shelves bulging with candy, decorations and costumes. You will even see stores that were empty being turned into Halloween Emporiums with all kinds of merchandise related to this holiday. Witches and Black cats start showing up in advertising. You may get invitations to costume parties and the latest horror movies hit the theaters. Television sees a rash of programs made for Halloween and all the old scary movies are played to get us in the mood for Halloween. Schools and businesses don't close for Halloween but you are not surprised by the fact that Dracula is your Bank Teller or that George W Bush is your check out clerk at the supermarket or that your waitresses at a restaurant is Britney Spears.



Not only is Halloween one of the most visible holidays it's also one with many layers of meaning. For some it's simply a day for the kids, a light hearted celebration of fancy and imagination. For others, it's a social event, a time for adults to throw parties and be with friends. There is an element of a fall harvest festival to this time. But there are some aspects of Halloween that cause concern for some people. Some see it as a time of consumerism when children are encouraged to gorge themselves on candy and spend too much on costumes and decorations. Others are disturbed by the ghoulish aspects surrounding Halloween and the abundance of gore and violence seen at movies and on television. Some are concerned about the holiday's connection with death and evil spirits, and see it as a tool used by the devil to lure people to perdition.

In this study we will explore the origins of Halloween and how it has developed into today's holiday. We will explore how it had meaning for early Christians and how we can reclaim this meaning today.

### *Brief History of Halloween*

#### ■ Ancient Origins

- Halloween has its origins in the Celtic festival of Samhain. Samhain was celebrated on October 31<sup>st</sup> marking the end of summer and preparation for the long, cold winter nights to come.
  - Celebration acknowledged that just as summer gives way to cold of winter so human life also gives way to death.
  - Samhain was also a night when the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead was "thin."
  - On this night they believed that supernatural powers that could cause harm were given free rein. To stave them off the lit bonfires.
  - Celts looked beyond the grim aspects of death and decay. They knew that following winter came spring with its renewal and regeneration. Samhain was therefore a time to share hopes and plans for the coming year. It was a time for acknowledging death and appeasing the forces of evil but also to affirm the power of life.

## ■ **Christian Connections**

- Around AD 300 St. Patrick brought Christianity to Ireland. In trying to integrate Christianity into life of the people St. Patrick incorporated some of the pagan festivals into the Christian year.
- Early Christians had set aside days to celebrate the power of death and to pay homage to the spirits of the departed.
- In 7<sup>th</sup> century All Saints' Day was first observed to honor the saints who did not have a particular day dedicated to them.
- In 9<sup>th</sup> century All Saints Day was fixed to be celebrated on November 1 and the preceding day that had been observed as Samhein was renamed All Hallows' eve or Halloween. (Hallow is an archaic word for saint.)
- Around year 1000 the church began to observe All Souls Day on November 2<sup>nd</sup>.
- Became a time to pray for the souls of those who had departed this life and developed into a festival to commemorate those who had died in the Christian faith and were in purgatory.
- Many Celtic practices retained. Became a practice for the poor to practice "souling" where they went door to door asking for bread or cake in return for prayers on behalf of loved ones who had died. The "soulers" would light their way by carrying a carved-out turnip holding a candle, signifying the souls of the dead trapped in purgatory (a precursor to the jack-'o-lantern).
- Protestant Reformers of 16<sup>th</sup> century denounced the concept of purgatory and so the celebration of Halloween in the church died out.
- The day was still observed in folk culture as a time of supernatural intensity when ghosts, spirits and witches were about.

## ■ **Halloween Comes to America**

- Halloween did not take root in America until the influx of Irish and Scottish immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- In 1890s the social elite began to use Halloween as an occasion to throw masked balls.
- Spread through the rest of society as many of the old customs were rediscovered and adapted and new traditions developed.
- In 20<sup>th</sup> century it developed into a children's holiday geared for families, spurred on by candy makers and party supply manufacturers.

## ***Confronting Scripture***

Look at the following scripture in light of what you see in Halloween as being. Also remember that in our faith we see death as being the culmination of our baptism and a time when we are reunited with Jesus in glory.

- 1 Corinthians 15:50-58
- Psalm 13
- Proverbs 14:32
- John 5:16-30
- Romans 6:1-14

## ***Confronting the Issues***

Be prepared when you come to this session to share your childhood memories of Halloween – the fun memories and the bad memories, what you like about Halloween and what bothers you about Halloween.

- Often people say they have had experiences of the departed being close by. The line between the living and the dead becomes thin.
  - Have you ever experienced this? If so what are your reaction and thoughts on this?
  - Do you think this is a real thing and that we do have experiences with those who have left this earth?
- How did scaring people become a part of Halloween?
- Do you think it is right that the Church should take a pagan or secular celebration and integrate it into the life of the church?
- Is celebrating Halloween a good or bad thing? Justify your response.
- Can we as Christians justify the celebration of the dead? If so why, if not why not.

## ***Conclusion***

Over recent years many churches have come out against Halloween as they see it as a celebration of the forces of evil. What we must confront is what is truly behind this day and what is in our hearts as we join in the festivities. We need to look at the history and original meanings so that we can determine our response to this day.