

ON HALLOWEEN

Dr. David McDonald

INTRO

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

Psalm 137.4

I used to love Trick-or-Treating as a little kid. Every year, my best friend Geoff Wright and I would walk around for hours in our suburban neighborhood collecting candy and getting into trouble. We'd eat ourselves into a coma and laugh and run around.

It was awesome.

Since I lived in the same house from first grade until my senior year of high school, Geoff and I became very familiar with all the homes in our area. We knew which ones gave lots of candy (so cool), and which ones gave money (lazy, but still cool), and which ones gave out apples (lame, uncool, and oddly industrious).

But there were always a few homes which, on Halloween, were completely dark. They looked abandoned, foreboding, and uninviting. I always just thought these homes were either for sale or that the owners were out somewhere else celebrating, but one night I clearly remember a middle-aged couple peeking out from behind their curtains, telling us: *don't even think about it* as we crossed over their lawn.

I asked Geoff: *what's their problem?*

And he told me: *they're Christians.*

This was a strange concept for me. I was a Christian, albeit a young one (just 7 or 8 years old at the time, old enough to understand "Christian" but too young to understand there was more than one kind). Furthermore, my dad was a pastor and if there was something Christians didn't do I felt pretty confident that he would tell me.

Well, I'm a Christian. I told Geoff.

Yeah, he said, but you don't turn off your lights.

Over the years I've come to realize that, concerning Halloween, there really are two kinds of Christian people: lights on, and lights off.

Christian people who leave the lights on engage Halloween (I'm intentionally avoiding the term 'celebrate' here). They may still have reservations about some of the pagan roots of Halloween, or about all the horror movies or spooky stuff in the news, but they love their community and celebrate life and enjoy getting to see little kids in costumes pander for sweets.

Christian people who turn their lights off distance themselves from Halloween completely. They tend to think of the event as a kind of soft glorification of demons and witches (or, sometimes, a very strong glorification) and believe that they should keep themselves completely free from any involvement whatsoever on a moral, ethical, and scriptural basis.

Many Christians have concerns about Halloween – about its origins with pagan and occult practices, about the scary movies that always seem to be released around October, and about the general atmosphere of fear and terror associated with the event – and in many cases those fears are entirely justified. Like anything, Halloween is a complex issue with numerous aspects to it that each require adjudication and discernment. Some Christians want to abolish the event altogether, while others consider it alright for their children to go trick-or-treating so long as they don't wear a scary costume.

Addressing common questions about this scary holiday may alleviate some of the concerns surrounding this controversial cultural issue.

Please allow me to be completely candid: I like Halloween. I know that many good and godly people have strong feelings in opposition to Halloween – believing it to be satanically inspired and rooted in pagan idolatrous practices – but I'm not one of those people. I don't mean to suggest, by taking a contrary opinion, that those who believe differently than I do are foolish somehow or uneducated, but in my opinion the "evil" many people often associate with Halloween has been greatly exaggerated.

For my part, Halloween was always about the special cartoons that are only released that fateful night in October: The Great Pumpkin (Charlie Brown), that Garfield special with the ghost pirates, and The Nightmare before Christmas.

I also loved all the accoutrements of Halloween – the plastic pumpkin containers for candy, the tacky lawn-eating inflatables, bottle rockets and M80s.

Later, as a dad, I was given these great memories of my daughter Anna dressing up as a princess and Jake dressing as Batman and jumping off our porch a hundred times to show off his cape.

But all the fear associated with Halloween often results in three problematic behaviors:

we speak hatefully,
we argue relentlessly,
we fantasize apocalyptically.

Allow me to explain what I mean, and why I believe it is so destructive.

First, when good Christian people allow themselves to become alarmed about Halloween they tend to act as if everyone who isn't alarmed by Halloween is either willfully ignorant of the demonic activity surrounding Halloween or complicit somehow with it. Because they are so certain that Halloween is spiritually evil, they only permit themselves these two intellectual options which forces them to regard those with contrary beliefs as either enemies or imbeciles, worthy in either case of aggressive behavior and scorn.

For myself, a proponent of Halloween festivities, I am often criticized and lambasted by otherwise charitable people who think – first – that I must never have learned about the pagan roots of the evening, and so they grab me and endeavor to shake some sense into me; however, once they discover I've already heard these historical truths, they then get concerned that I am working secretly for the same powers they are opposing. One woman said to me, albeit several years ago in a different place: you have chosen to align yourself with Satan.

I choose not to repeat what I said then: no, I wholeheartedly have not.

For my part, I have resolved to love and serve Jesus with all my heart including – and perhaps especially – on October 31st during which time I choose to bring the light of Christ into a dark world and shine brightly.

This, then, is the often unexplored intellectual option for Christians once confronted with the dark roots of Halloween: we aren't worried.

I know Halloween has a dark past. I know there are still some who choose to cultivate that darkness in a variety of ways. I know, also, that I have neither a share nor a desire to celebrate that darkness. That darkness cannot harm me. That darkness does not control me. I am called, and equipped, and appointed by God to shine light into that darkness. The best means of which I know and am capable of bringing light into dark places is by being there myself, and bringing love and laughter and happiness and holiness with me and in me.

I am an uncontaminated celebrant.

Second, and this – of course – relates to the first (as they all must inevitably), our fear compels us to argue relentlessly about our differences of opinion on biblical grey matters.

The Bible does not speak about Halloween and anything we may choose to interpret from the Bible in light of Halloween is conjecture at best. It is a “grey” area, meaning a question of individual conscience – like personal consumption of alcohol or musical preference. Halloween is, to put it simply, an issue upon which we must often ‘agree to disagree.’

But we usually don't. Either because we love Halloween and are resentful of those who want to demonize it; or because we think Halloween is demonic and are indignant with those who seek to

explain it away we tend to gird up our intellectual loins and drop the gloves for every fight we can ever have on the issue.

This should not be the case, in the first place because you can never really change anyone's mind about anything by arguing, but also because the very act of arguing is itself likely to cause us to absolutize our opinions and make enemies of those with differing perspectives.

My friend Shawn, a college student I used to pastor, was a great example for me of how to avoid arguing over grey issues. He and I had different opinions on a number of biblical issues and I always wanted to argue about them, while Shawn never did (despite being incredibly astute and very well read). We disagreed about predestination, tongues and interpretation, the eschaton, alcohol, human sexuality, and a host of other issues; yet, somehow, Shawn understood that our varying perspectives on these matters didn't have to make us enemies and didn't mean he had to attend another church.

I always admired that about him, and have used him as an example of the way in which we are called to discover our convictions and share them respectfully. Too many of us do the opposite, but our churches need more Shawns.

Third, we tend to fantasize apocalyptically when we're afraid of what Halloween might mean. Now, I don't want to make fun or lampoon this phenomenon, but I have frequently noticed that when something like Halloween comes up (and its increasing popularity and market share, etc) we use that information as justification for our belief that the world is going to hell in a hand basket, that everything is worse than it used to be, and that our world is no longer safe, that Christians are no longer welcome in it, and that we're just a short step from the Great Tribulation during which we will be so heavily persecuted for our faith that we will likely either be imprisoned or killed.

None of that is true. What is true is that the world has always had – and will always have (until God's great eschatological clean up) good people with some evil mixed inside of them ... which is to say all of us. And it's also true that the world has great goodness in it now, though there is much evil around us and evil makes for better news so they show it more frequently on Fox and CNN.

However, we cannot let the evil in the world dictate when we keep our lights on.

We need to stop hating others.

We need to stop bickering.

We need to stop forecasting gloom and doom.

Here then, is what I'm really hoping to achieve with this little paper:

I don't want you to be afraid.

I don't want you to be angry.

Believe what you will about Halloween – this paper explores its pagan roots, its contemporary manifestations, and gives suggestions for how to think through the issue of whether or not to celebrate Halloween and to what degree – but whatever you decide, decide first that you don't have to be afraid of Halloween, nor do you have to be angry about it.

Decide that – no matter what – you're going to keep your lights on.

Perfect love casts out all fear.

1 John 4.18

THE ORIGINS OF HALLOWEEN

Halloween's roots come from the ancient Celts, a tribe living about 2,000 years ago in the areas that are now Ireland, Great Britain and northern France.

The Celts were first described as a fierce, warlike, terrifying people, many of whom would have strings of human heads tied on their bridles. Halloween was their main holiday, called Samhain. It was a festival that honored the Celtic lord of death. The celebration marked the beginning of the season of cold, darkness, and decay.

On the night before the November 1 new year, Celts believed that Samhain and the dead would roam the earth causing all kinds of trouble. So the Celtic priests, Druids, would demand that all light be extinguished on Halloween night and sacrifices be made to prevent trouble.

The restless spirits' "tricks" could be avoided only if appropriately "treated," thus originated the present-day Halloween practice of children dressing up like spirits and arriving at the front door chanting (or demanding) "Trick or Treat."

The Druids built a huge New Year's bonfire of oak branches, which they considered sacrificed. They burned animals, crops, and even human beings as sacrifices.

During the celebration people wore costumes made of animal heads and skins. They told fortunes by examining the remains of the sacrifices.

After sacrifices, villagers would carry the fire, thought to be sacred, back to their homes in carved out vegetable shells – the origin of our Jack-o-Lanterns.

Regional Halloween customs developed among various groups of Celts. In Ireland, for example, people begged for food in a parade that honored Muck Olla, their sun god. The leader of the parade wore a white robe and the head of an animal. In England, families sat by the fire and told stories while they ate treats such as apples and nuts.

These pagan Celts believed that evil spirits lurked about as the sun god grew pale and the Samhain grew stronger.

The Romans conquered the Celts in A.D. 43 and ruled what is now Great Britain for about 400 years. During this period, two Roman autumn festivals were combined with the Celtic festival of Samhain. Both pagan rituals, one of them, called Feraila, was held in late October to honor the dead. The other festival honored Pomona, the Roman Goddess of fruit and trees. Apples became associated with Halloween because of this festival.

In the eighth century Pope Gregory II moved the church festival honoring martyrs of "All Saints" to November 1 as a Christian alternative to the Celtic New Year celebrations. "All Hallow's Eve" or

"Halloween" means the "evening of holy persons" and was to be used in spiritual preparation for All Saints Day.

HALLOWEEN NOW IS DIFFERENT THAN HALLOWEEN THEN

Halloween, in our contemporary context, is really only about two important things: kids, and candy.

For most children there is no religious significance involved in either the day itself or in such elements as pumpkins or costumes. It's true that such things as jack-o'-lanterns, bonfires and black cats, which are part of the Halloween tradition, may have roots in pre-Christian activities. But when children go trick-or-treating or visit haunted houses, they are not thinking about participating in any religious festivities at all. They are just trying to have fun.

All of this isn't to say, of course, that there are no occult overtones to modern-day celebrations of Halloween. It does have some contemporary significance to wiccans and druids, and those elements, which could be considered anti-Christian should most certainly be avoided.

According to the Bible, the world of the occult is real and energized by demonic powers that must be recognized and resisted by Christians because our beliefs and practices bear consequences in this world and in the next. However, there is a clear difference between the real occult practices of shamanism, magic, and divination and the contemporary practice of trick-or-treating, carving pumpkins, and bobbing for apples. Since the door of the occult world must be entered through human interest and initiative, general Halloween practices engaged in by most people do not draw them into occult activities.

Despite the historical roots of Halloween all it takes for us to dissociate the Halloween we have *now* from Halloween *then* is a doorbell and a digital camera.

It's hard to believe that the systematic collection of candy in a given neighborhood by "Spider-Man" and his "Rugrat" friends constitutes the promotion of an occult worldview or demonic racketeering.

Even the recognized Christian authority on cults and the occult, Walter Martin, said: *If Big Bird comes to my door, he's definitely going to get a treat.*

I'm not saying all of this in order to engage in some theological hairsplitting, simply to help us all make logical and moral distinctions. Obviously if anything about Halloween feels weird or bad or violates your convictions somehow that don't get involved; but most Christians believe they can celebrate Halloween as a purely secular day of fun and that seems pretty consistent with our beliefs about other forms of "mindless entertainment" like movies, video games, Facebook and sports. They have no redeeming cosmic features – they're just fun.

But condemning trick-or-treating outright on the basis that Halloween has pagan origins is a little inconsistent with many of our other moral choices. Halloween had dark roots, true, but so does Christmas (and its association with Saturnalia), and so does Astronomy (now regarded as a credible

science, but was originally a cultic system unto itself), and so do any kind of covenant (in the ancient world it was not only the Israelites that made covenants, nor was it likely that they were the first).

We cannot evaluate something solely in terms of its origin, without giving appropriate consideration to how it has changed or evolved in contemporary practice.

While the Bible expressly forbids a believer's involvement in certain pagan and/or occult practices (see Deuteronomy 18.9-13), for the vast majority of American families Halloween has nothing to do with the practice of, or belief in, occultism. Rather, this celebration gives children an opportunity to dress up in funny, spooky, and/or outrageous costumes and accumulate candy by the pillowcase.

The Apostle Paul deals with these kinds of issues when he addresses meat offered to pagan idols. Is this wrong for the Christian—who doesn't believe in the false gods to whom the meat was offered—to eat meat offered to idols?

Here's Paul's advice:

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall

1 Corinthians 8:4-13

If Paul were alive today, he might write something like . . .

Don't worry about the ancient association of these holidays with paganism since we know there are no gods of sun and death, and that the dead don't roam the earth. You're not appeasing Samhain when you go "trick-or-treating" or sacrificing to the gods by carving a jack-o-lantern.

But if your family or friends have reservations about these things, don't encourage them to do something they feel is "sinful."

Again, my aim in writing this is not to convince everyone that they should dress up like Dracula on October 31st, just to gently remind us that there is nothing to be afraid of, and no reason to be angry, on Halloween.

Engage at your leisure.

5 THINGS TO CONSIDER ABOUT HALLOWEEN FOR YOUR FAMILY

If you've never really considered Halloween – either because you've never participated and wonder if you're missing out on something, or because you've always participated and wonder if you've been too quick to jump in – here are some things I think are worth discussing within every Christian family. Bear in mind that different people do have different ideas about whether or not to celebrate Halloween, but whatever you decide try to avoid using bad arguments to support moral convictions.

Many times we have questions related to spiritual matters, but the Bible is not specific or clear about that situation. A perfect example is the issue of drinking alcohol. Is it okay for a Christian to drink alcohol? The Bible says, in Ephesians 5.18: *Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, let the Holy Spirit fill and control you* (New Living Translation). But Paul also tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 5.23: *Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses* (New International Version). And of course we know that Jesus' first miracle involved turning water into wine.

Don't worry, we are not going to debate about wine. The point is that there are issues that are debatable. In Romans 14, these are called "disputable matters."

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God... therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

...blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Romans 14.1-6, 13-18, 22-23 NIV

Based on what Paul says in Romans 14, here are a couple of considerations for you as you try and determine whether or not you'll be involved with Halloween, and to what extent:

1. Halloween is not mentioned in the Bible and **the scriptures give us no clear-cut way of deciding whether or not we should participate**. It best fits into a theological grey area, leaving room for individual Christian people to decide for themselves whether or not it is okay for them to be involved in any of the festivities associated with Halloween and – if so – to what extent.
2. As such, whether or not we're involved in Halloween (or to what extent we're involved) is a **matter of personal preference and conviction**. Your church cannot tell you what you should do, though your church is likely to offer suggestions and insights that will help you make up your own mind.
3. It is possible for godly people to disagree on Halloween, but it should **never be an issue that forces us to break fellowship** with other believers (see 1 Corinthians 1.10: *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought*).
4. **Decisions regarding Halloween are primarily family decisions**, not primarily ecclesial or institutional decisions, and the ultimate authority on these issues reside with the head of each home. If trick-or-treating violates a Christian's conscience, alternative events (fall parties or celebrations of All Saints' Day) allow children to view Christianity as a religion that permits them to have fun. Sinful activities should always be avoided, but be careful that children do not develop a "party-pooper" view of God (see Colossians 3.18-21).
5. **Westwinds uses Halloween as a time for mission and cultural engagement**, not as an occasion to celebrate darkness but as an occasion to shine light into dark places (see Matthew 5.14-16: *You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven*).

Again, my hope is that you and your family will decide to leave your lights on, metaphorically, and – rather than get angry about a bunch of stuff, or perceive the world en route to hell in a hand basket, or even simply distance yourselves from the rest of your neighborhood that night – engage the people around you with love and charity. That doesn't mean you have to buy into all the Halloween stuff whole hog, just that you will choose to engage the world with the love of God rather than take the night off.

WAYS TO ENGAGE HALLOWEEN SAFELY AND SPIRITUALLY

Regardless of what you decide to do on October 31st, here are some suggested ways you can make ‘spiritual use’ out of Halloween: you can have spiritual conversations with your kids, you can participate in whatever way and at whatever level you’re comfortable with, or you can provide an alternative.

1. Use this opportunity to teach your children. Teach them about the spiritual world. Teach them about church history. Teach them about how to respond to the culture around them, about when and how to engage that culture, and when and how to diverge from it. Teach them that life with Christ has power over darkness. Teach them that they don’t have to be afraid and that they don’t have to be angry. This is a great occasion to tell your kids that there is a spiritual world filled with goodness from God and evil from Satan (see Ephesians 2.1-10); but also that life with Christ has power over darkness (see I John 4.4).
2. Participate in only those aspects or portions of Halloween with which you are comfortable. For example, you may be alright with Trick-or-Treat, but not with Halloween parties that feature scary (or seductive) themes. You may find it enjoyable to pass out treats to children, providing that those treats are edifying somehow (giving away *Veggie Tales* movies is a popular, albeit costly, solution). Finally, you may simply draw the line at the occult and/or demonic-oriented movies that are often released around Halloween, recognizing that – while little kids are not involved in that stuff at all and for them Halloween is innocent – there are some weirdos out there who want to stay in love with the darkness.
3. Throw a neighborhood party that celebrates life and laughter, joy and goodness, and invite everyone to come to your Halloween party. Invite the ghosts and ghouls and grave robbers to experience an alternative to death and dismemberment. Show them a good time. There could be no better witness than throwing the most remarkable party on Halloween that honors glory over grotesque. Rather than “hide” in the face of evil, we should unabashedly and boldly create an alternative that is positive and uplifting; that celebrates good over evil and the triumph of God over Satan. We need to provide an environment that also makes room for heaps of fun while using the day as a “teachable moment” to celebrate God’s protection, provision and purpose for our lives.

For my part, I always take the opportunities that Halloween affords to talk to my kids about all the spooky weird stuff in the Bible. I talk to them about Leviathan (see Isaiah 27) and Behemoth (see Job 40), about the nephilim (see Numbers 13) and Goliath (see 1 Samuel 17), about Nebuchadnezzar turning into a wild beast (see Daniel 4) and about Og, the giant King of Bashan (see Deuteronomy 3). These are the Bible’s “ghost stories” (consider, also, Samuel and the Witch of Endor [see 1 Samuel 28] and Jesus’ resurrection miracles, as well as the Garasene demoniac [see Mark 5]). I want my kids to be

fully aware of the supernatural world, its reality, and the hierarchy of power within it. I want them to know that there are scary things in the world, but that the power of Christ is greater than the power of fear and darkness, of Satan and violence. I want my children to live with a robust biblical theology of monsters, and that Christ is Lord over them.

As I've written about elsewhere (see "*Monsters: the imagination of faith and fear*" available on Amazon.com) you cannot be brave if you're never afraid, but our fear never has to cripple us for we are worthy, protected, loved, and empowered by God.

As an example of people who got it right, I love the story of All Saints Day, a day the seventh century church set aside for remembering early Christians who died for their beliefs. By the year 900 the date was combined with the pagan rituals to be celebrated November 1. Another name for All Saints Day was All Hallows. October 31 was known as All Hallows Eve which was shortened to Halloween.

By overlapping this practice of honoring and thanking God for the example of faithful believers with the Samhain festival, the church attempted to counteract heathen thought and influence. This was especially true in areas of Europe where Samhain was popular. The Church not only sought to give Christians an alternative, spiritually edifying holiday; but also to proclaim the supremacy of the gospel over pagan superstition.

No matter what you choose to do on October 31st, I don't think there could be a more important message to convey to those around you than that: the gospel has power, and light always penetrates the darkness.

CONCLUSION

Having looked at the various aspects of Halloween I was to reiterate my main point: there is nothing to be afraid of, and nothing that should make us angry about people who either celebrate Halloween or choose to abstain from it.

In fact, if I could sum up my aspirations for Christians concerning Halloween in one, itsy bitsy little mantra it would be this: *no judgment, no kafluffle, no craziness.*

We need to use good reasoning to support our moral and spiritual convictions. Applying biblical theology to the questions of ordinary life takes intellectual skill and care.

Since the door of the occult world must be entered through human interest and initiative, general Halloween practices engaged in by most people do not draw them into occult activities; on the contrary, the contemporary festivities associated with October 31st are really encapsulated by the image of a little boy in a bedsheet knocking on a neighbor's door.

I want you to think seriously about keeping your lights on. There is room for both kinds of Christians within Christ's church – lights on and lights off – but my heart brakes when I think about the lost missional opportunities every October 31st, especially when the decision to leave the lights off for so many Christians is based on fear and fury.

May you invite the Spirit to make you brave, and grow you in strength and faith.

May you understand and acknowledge that Christ goes before you in power, and you are protected.

May you trust in God the Father to watch over your children, your home, and your future as you endeavor to shine your light into the darkest places.

And may you avoid toothaches, toilet paper in your trees, and inflatables of all variety this Halloween.