

HOLIDAYS

A Parent's Guide to

HALLOWEEN

axis

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In the end, whether or not an individual or family should celebrate Halloween in any fashion should be carefully considered in relation to their own situation and heart.

—[Sarah Hamaker](#)

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Got double, double, toil, and trouble knowing what to think about Halloween?

What comes to mind when you think of Halloween—Pumpkins? Witches? Scary movies starring Jamie Lee Curtis?

More than that, what *should* you think about it? You might wonder why we're even asking this question. Isn't it obvious that a holiday celebrating ghosts, vampires, zombies, and witches is clearly one that Christians ought to avoid?

Maybe so. And maybe not. We wouldn't be loving God with all our minds if we didn't thoughtfully evaluate why we do or do not observe Halloween.

Why is Halloween appealing?

It probably won't surprise you to learn that [Americans spent \\$9.1 billion](#) on Halloween last year. Around 175 million people are predicted to celebrate the holiday in 2018, spending an average of \$86.79 per person. In pop culture, Halloween is associated with everything from kid movies like *Casper* and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* to horror films like *The Shining* to goofier productions like *Ghostbusters*. What they all typically have in common is some element of dark, supernatural danger.

People enjoy Halloween for a number of reasons. One is that they're fascinated with the supernatural. As Christians, we know that there is a spiritual dimension to the world, so it makes sense that people would be interested in exploring it on some level. [Stephen King is attributed as saying](#) that "horror is a way to face death." It's possible that some people are interested in Halloween because they see it as a way of [facing the darker aspects of life](#) without there being serious consequences.

More often, though, the reasons why people like Halloween are probably simpler: They enjoy wearing costumes, eating treats, and going to parties. It's easy to see why children would like the holiday since kids typically like candy and love using their imaginations. One friend of ours says she loves Halloween because of how unique the decorations are, and she enjoys the opportunity to be childlike by wearing a costume. As is well-known,

many (not all, but many) teenagers and college students look forward to Halloween as an opportunity to don a new persona—one with fewer inhibitions—for a night.

And yes, some people genuinely do gravitate toward Halloween out of hatred for Christianity. One friend of ours knew a guy who deliberately celebrated Halloween during Christmas because he hated Christianity and saw the two holidays as being directly opposed to each other.

Why is it called “Halloween”?

We don’t really use the word “hallow” that much anymore, but you probably recognize it [from the Lord’s Prayer](#): “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” To “hallow” something [means to treat it as holy](#), and the word “hallow” used to refer to a saint or holy person.

The word “Halloween” derives from the phrase “All Hallows Eve,” which is the night before “All Hallows Day” (also called “All Saints Day”) on November 1st. All Saints Day is a day when [Catholics remember the faithful](#) who have attained sainthood, but it comes from a tradition in the early church of [commemorating Christian martyrs](#). Feasts in memory of Christian martyrs were celebrated as early as the 4th century. Pope Boniface IV [formally instituted All Saints’ Day](#) in the 7th century, and Pope Gregory III moved the celebration to November 1st.

Doesn’t Halloween have pagan roots?

Maybe the origins of the word “Halloween” are closer to Christianity than to any other belief system, but does the actual holiday have pagan origins?

When we looked for the answer to this question, we turned up a lot of conflicting information. It’s widely believed that the Celtic festival of [Samhain is the basis for Halloween](#) and that the Catholic church “Christianized” the festival by turning it into a celebration of the saints. Samhain, which the Celts celebrated over 2,000 years ago, occurs at the same time of year as All Saints’ Day and is believed to be how they

[brought in the new year](#). People also point to similarities between the modern elements of Halloween and the practices of Samhain, such as a focus on the supernatural, leaving treats for the spirits, and [wearing costumes](#).

Others, however, point out that the [Celts kept no written records](#) and that we know very little about their actual practices. Because [festivals commemorating the saints](#) occurred for centuries before these celebrations were formalized into All Hallows' Day, it does not necessarily follow that the church was directly attempting to Christianize a pagan holiday. [This author](#) states that the church instituted All Saints' Day several centuries after the Celts had converted to Christianity, a claim that seems to be validated [here](#) and [here](#). It's also possible that the reason why the pope decided to put All Saints' Day on November 1st was *not* to co-opt Samhain, but rather to more easily accommodate the [pilgrims who came to Rome for the occasion](#).

This is not to say that Samhain has had no influence at all over our modern celebration of Halloween. But it does mean that the influence is less direct than we've been led to believe. And frankly, whether or not the church was attempting to Christianize paganism or knew nothing about Celtic practices actually doesn't matter all that much. Why is that? Well, the practices of the ancient Celts and the early church are so far removed from us today that they tend to have little to do with why or how most of us celebrate Halloween. In fact, our modern Halloween traditions are more closely tied to folklore and the traditions of Irish immigrants in the 19th century than anything else.

What are the more recent roots?

The Puritans weren't too crazy about Catholic holidays, so after the Reformation, Puritans in both England and the U.S. [either suppressed or banned Halloween entirely](#). But when Irish Catholic immigrants came to the U.S. in the mid-1800s, they brought with them some [traditions that will sound familiar](#): bobbing for apples, playing pranks on neighbors, and disguising themselves so they wouldn't get caught.

Over the next few decades, Halloween became increasingly commercialized and has primarily become a secular holiday. So where does the idea of it being the devil's day come from? Certain aspects of Halloween, like carving pumpkins or black cats, [come from folklore](#). But much of the Christian perception of Halloween as a satanic holiday

has to do with several things that happened in the 20th century. One of these was the creation of horror and slasher films, such as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*. Another was that the Church of Satan did adopt Halloween as its holiday, although we should note this happened in the 1960s, well after it was common for people to celebrate Halloween. Stories of people tampering with Halloween candy also didn't do much to help people have a positive perspective of the holiday.

Christian opposition to Halloween was also [strongly influenced by Jack Chick](#), who started publishing evangelistic tracts in the 1960s. These tracts did contain biblical truths (we actually know someone who was saved through reading one), but they were also overtly anti-Catholic and often relied on misinformation and sensationalism. For example, the tract [The Trick](#) portrays a group of witches sabotaging Halloween candy and performing incantations so they can provide Satan with human sacrifices and bring more children under his influence. Another tract, [Boo!](#), depicts Satan with the head of a pumpkin demanding a human sacrifice from a group of people on Halloween, which was supposedly Satan's birthday. He ends up murdering a bunch of people with a chainsaw, and the only defense against him is praying and rebuking him in Jesus' name. So if the reasons you're hesitant to celebrate Halloween are that it's a Satanic holiday with roots in Druidism or that your kids might be the victim of deadly pranks, these ideas sound a lot more like Jack Chick's version of history than the actual history of Halloween.

What about *Día de Muertos*?

If you live in an area with Mexican influence, you may have heard of [Día de Muertos](#) (or *Día de los Muertos*), i.e. "Day of the Dead." Though *Día de Muertos* and Halloween have similarities, [it's not "Mexican Halloween,"](#) as it has been referred to at times.

Instead, *Día de Muertos* [originated](#) in southern and central Mexico and has roots in 3,000-year-old Aztec traditions. It's a happy (as opposed to spooky or sad) celebration and remembrance of deceased loved ones and spans over 3 days (most recently Oct. 31-Nov. 2 to coincide with the Catholic triduum of [Allhallowtide](#), though it was originally celebrated in summer). To summarize the holiday very simply, participants honor their ancestors by erecting colorful altars in remembrance of the deceased, eating *pan de muertos* (bread of the dead), and bringing gifts to their loved ones' graves. (To see

some of the imagery associated with the holiday, check out [this article](#) and the 2017 Disney film [Coco](#), which was inspired by the holiday.)

Despite their similarities, Día de Muertos and Halloween evolved separately and only seem to have begun intermingling in the U.S. in recent years.

How have Christians responded to Halloween?

As evidenced by the Chick Tracts mentioned above, there are segments of Christianity that have responded with fear, alarm, and extreme opposition to the holiday. But there are plenty of devoted Christians who see Halloween as a chance to have fun and go trick-or-treating with their kids. Some churches have a “harvest” or “fall” festival where kids can dress up, play games, and win candy, while other churches use October 31st as an opportunity to [celebrate Reformation Day](#). A friend of ours grew up in a church that had Reformation-themed carnival games and gave out candy (but it had to be fun-sized with no Halloween-themed wrapping!).

Is there a biblical precedent for either abstaining from or joining in Halloween festivities?

Obviously, Halloween isn't explicitly mentioned in the Bible, so it's not as easy or as clear cut as pointing to a passage and saying, “See? It says right here that we should/shouldn't participate!” That said, the arguments against Halloween often rely on Scripture [to make their point](#). They turn to passages like [Phil. 4:8-9](#), [Levi. 20:27](#), [Eph. 5:11](#), and [2 Cor. 6:17](#) to admonish believers to only dwell on what's pure and lovely, to abstain from witchcraft, to expose darkness, and to be separate from the world. They also mention Christ's call to be “in the world but not of it.” Case closed, right?

Not so fast. There are plenty of solid Christians who [make a case for Halloween](#) (*paywall*), pointing out that many other modern holidays also have roots in pagan practices but were adopted because the Christians of the time knew that it wouldn't work to simply banish the pagan rituals; they needed to offer alternatives that not only filled the void

left by the heathen holidays, but also that brought light and life in their stead. In this way, many Christians view these once-pagan traditions as having been redeemed and reclaimed in Christ's name. Of course, there are many solid Christians who could also make a case against that idea, so what should we believe?

Let's go back to Scripture, this time from a different perspective, to gain some understanding. Yes, we should dwell on what's lovely and good and pure, and yes, we should abstain from witchcraft and expose darkness. Those are all true. But in cherry picking a few verses here and there, we run the danger of ignoring the overarching narrative of God's Word. Rather than simply looking at a passage or two, we should consider the whole and the heart of God. When we do that, what picture emerges?

The story God is writing, the story into which He's calling us, is one of redemption and renewal—one that is not marked by fear, hiding, or isolation, but by reckless love for our neighbors, the downcast, orphans, widows, and strangers. In fact, if we look at [the actual Scripture](#) from which the “in the world but not of it” idea is taken, we get a sharper understanding of the mission God has given us:

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. . . .As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

Yes, we are not *of* the world; we are to be different, cut from a different cloth and held to a higher standard. But we are sent into it, just as Christ was sent into it (and, interestingly enough, He doesn't want us to be removed from it, only protected from the evil one while we're in it). So what did Christ do when He was in the world? He ate with tax collectors and sinners, He spent time with the marginalized and outcast, He healed lepers and the lame, He protected prostitutes, and He built relationships. In short, He went out into the world! He *didn't* hide away in the synagogue or start a home church or even escape from the pagan Roman culture by leaving to start His own elsewhere. He created a counterculture directly *in the midst of* that pagan culture! Maybe a better interpretation of Jesus' prayer is to “**live in the midst of and for the world.**” Just as Christ couldn't have done any of the things He did if He had been afraid of the world, we can't bring His healing love to those around us *if we're never around anyone* who doesn't already have it.

The Body of Christ can no longer exist spatially apart from the world; her call is to be the implanted people of God living, eating, working, and dying in every corner of town.

We are a people sent to minister personally and locally on our own streets to the real people we see every day from our front porch and whom we hear fighting with one another through our thin apartment walls.

If we look at the world through that overarching narrative of Scripture, we can see that Halloween (as it exists in the 21st century) is a beautiful opportunity for hospitality. In fact, Halloween is the most welcoming night of the year: a night when the entire neighborhood opens their homes to one another, when neighbors openly welcome each other onto their porches and into their homes. So how can we, as Christians, not only join in the hospitality but be the most welcoming house in the neighborhood?

So what should my family and I do?

As with many other aspects of life, what you decide to do is between you and God! When Paul talks about whether or not believers should [eat food sacrificed to idols](#), he says that this decision depends on the person's conscience. Because idols are not real, there's nothing wrong with eating food that's been offered to them. But if people are violating their consciences by eating this food, then they shouldn't, and other believers should be sensitive to their convictions. (Similarly, if someone was rescued from the occult or practicing witchcraft, observing Halloween may not be appropriate for them: "[It is understandable](#) that they look with horror upon what once enslaved them." You know your loved ones and their histories best, so you can best decide what makes sense.)

If it violates your conscience to celebrate Halloween the way our culture does, then don't do it. If you see trick-or-treating as an opportunity for you and your kids to have fun and to join your community, then go ahead—and use it as a time to brainstorm as a family how to make your home welcoming and safe for anyone. What's important is *why* you're doing what you're doing and whether you are honoring God with your decision. No matter what you decide, explaining to your kids the reasons why you made that decision will help them understand and possibly be more willing to accept your decision. If your kids are old enough and they aren't happy with your decision, offer to do some research into the holiday, its roots, and other faithful Christians' perspectives on it together.

Anything else I should know?

There are two other aspects of Halloween that are worth mentioning. First is the party culture surrounding the holiday, which we briefly mentioned above. Teens, college students, and 20-somethings often look forward to Halloween as a time to “be” someone else and to do things that are out of character for them, but not necessarily for their new personas. This is best embodied by the trend to make “sexy” versions of costumes. You know the ones. (Yeah, we have no idea how a goldfish can be sexy, either, but trust us, costume makers have found ways—usually with more emphasis on the “sexy” than on the “goldfish.”) Why do so many people (often whom you’d never expect) buy and wear them?

Pretending to be someone else and forgetting one’s inhibitions for the night is tempting for a number of reasons. After all, many young people are under pressure and expectations to meet extremely high standards in almost every aspect of their lives. Getting the chance to “let go” and just have fun often sounds like just the respite they need. (Or it could just be that they want an excuse to party...) No matter their motivations, these are conversations worth having with your teens. Are they hoping to join in? If so, why? Have they thought through the consequences (because even if you don’t look like you, you’re still you and will have to face yourself the next day)? What are they feeling pressure from, if any? What can you do to help them find healthier outlets and breaks? Be willing to talk to them about it, even if it’s uncomfortable or awkward.

The second aspect stems from the first, and it’s really important. For Christians, it can be super tempting to look down on and judge anyone we observe behaving or dressing inappropriately on/around Halloween. **But don’t give in to the temptation!** Why? Because all of them, like us, are broken people in need of God’s grace. Holding our tongues until we get home, then unleashing judgment on the single mom who wore an inappropriate costume within earshot of our kids teaches them that it’s ok to judge others based on their appearances, to belittle others for their choices, and to condemn them because they don’t make the choices we think they should make. Instead, let’s commit to loving and welcoming everyone with whom we come into contact this October. Who knows? Maybe our kids will see and know that it’s safe to come to us when they’ve messed up. . . .or, even better, learn to not judge their classmates, but instead be welcoming, gracious, and kind no matter their outward behaviors.

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to Thanksgiving](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to The Twelve Days of Christmas](#)
- Check out axis.org for even more resources!
- If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low yearly or monthly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass!](#)

Additional Resources

- [“Is Halloween Candy Tampering a Myth?”](#) ThoughtCo.com

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Recap

- Americans spend a lot of money on Halloween. Some enjoy the darker aspects of the holiday, but the vast majority just like the opportunity to have fun dressing up and eating candy.
- Many Christians are understandably reluctant to observe Halloween because of its associations with the horror genre, witchcraft, and pranks.
- While Halloween has some tenuous connections with the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain, the word itself comes from the early church's celebration of All Saints' Day, originally instituted to commemorate Christian martyrs.
- Today's Halloween practices have their roots in folklore and the traditions of 19th century Irish Catholic immigrants.
- Día de Muertos and Halloween are separate holidays with completely different roots.
- Anti-Catholicism, horror films, and fundamentalist sensationalism have shaped modern Christian perceptions of Halloween.
- It's important to consider not just one or two passages of Scripture when assessing whether or not to observe Halloween, but all of Scripture. What best reflects the heart of God to those around us?
- Whether Christians observe Halloween and how they do so depends on their personal convictions and how they believe they can best honor God and love their neighbors.

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!

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Discussion Questions

- What have you heard Christians say about Halloween?
- What do you think about Halloween? Do you think there's anything about it that is clearly demonic?
- Why do you think most people celebrate Halloween?
- Have you ever met anyone who celebrated Halloween because they hated Christianity?
- What do you think about modern Halloween celebrations (e.g. costumes, jack o' lanterns, fall festivals, corn mazes, hay rides, haunted houses, etc.)?
- Do you think it's possible to celebrate Halloween in a way that honors God?
- How can we find reliable information about the history of Halloween?
- How can we love the people in our neighborhood this Halloween (or month)? What are ways we can be welcoming and kind to them?
- How can we pray for our neighborhood this Halloween?
- (For older children) Have you heard of Halloween parties that will involve alcohol? Are you wanting to go to one of them? Why/why not? Do you feel like you will be missing out if you don't go? Why/why not?

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!