

Halloween

By J.S. Smith

Coming to a neighborhood near you: Dozens of children dressed as their favorite movie and television characters, carrying bags or buckets as they ring your door bell and demand a ransom of sweets. We call it Halloween and if it goes only this far, it seems to be harmless enough.

The “Trick or Treat” demand is more tradition than threat. Tricks are rarely played as the treats, packaged for the occasion by the mercenary folks in Hershey, Pa., flow freely. Still, in some communities, vandalism and even arson are regular parts of the evening’s festivities. Twenty years ago, the pranks went further as candy was occasionally adulterated by razors and poison. However, mostly due to its demonic origin, Halloween is criticized.

The designation, “Halloween,” is a contraction of the phrase, “All Hallows’ Eve,” which has reference to the day before November 1, All Saints Day on the Catholic calendar. During the Dark Ages, when heathenism was blended into Catholicism, an October 31 Celtic fire festival meant to ward away evil spirits was combined with All Saint’s Day. The heathen believed that on this day the souls of the dead would revisit their former homes and perform all sorts of mischief. Thus witches, goblins, ghosts and demons became attached to the observance and people truly expected to see them roaming about the countryside. All Hallows’ Eve was an occasion to placate the alleged evil forces with fires and offerings. It was also considered to be the most favorable time for divinations and the only day on which the help of the devil was invoked.

Rather than conquer and purge these ugly practices, Catholicism marched into pagan lands and adapted the faith to fit the superstition. All Saints’ Day took on an even less Biblical attitude. Today, Halloween has truly eclipsed the “church holiday” in importance to most everyone.

The modern observance of Halloween has nothing to do with Catholicism or an expression of faith at all. Its attachment to demonology is titular only, as such superstitions are regularly mocked by the observance as false and foolish. To most, Halloween is nothing more than a community masquerade, an opportunity for people to visit in a way few do anymore. Where Catholicism failed to belittle the heathenism, Americans have succeeded in stealing their day while exposing and mocking its false beliefs.

Recently, some Christian writers have asserted that every child who goes trick-or-treating is participating in a nationwide devil worship. Such language is too extreme and causes the real concerns about Halloween to be obscured by overreaction. As people are heard to worry that Christ has been taken out of Christmas (I would argue he was never in it in the first place), it is clear that in most places, the devil *has* been removed from Halloween.

Still, certain facets of Halloween should be avoided as inconsistent with Christianity. If the “Trick or Treat” demand is said with a wink and the understanding of all involved, it is a harmless custom. If the trick is truly intended as punishment -- papering the trees, egging the door, etc. -- this is wrong (Matt. 7:12).

The practice of divination, as in games like Ouija, is clearly condemned in God’s word (Exod. 22:18, 1 Sam. 28:7-25, Gal. 5:20). Depending on the stars or demons for answers is sinful (Isa. 8:19-20).

The glorification of demons also should be avoided. The world has no need for another devil’s advocate.

If we can find a way to mark the cultural custom of Christmas as a secular, family day, surely we can remove the evil of Halloween and have a candy and costume pilgrimage in the neighborhood. Avoid the pitfalls and keep it clean.