

Halloween's Origins with Celts and Romans

The Halloween we know today is the successor to a Celtic seasonal festival called Samhain (pronounced sow-an or sow-in). The Celts were a tribe that developed an agricultural society. Millennia ago, these warriors of the British Isles and France recognized Samhain as an important festival with respect to their farming calendar. It is one of four seasonal festivals the Celts celebrated throughout the year. They divided a year into two halves: a light period and a dark period. The festivals of the spring and summer fell to the light period, whereas the festivals of the autumn and winter fell to the dark period. Samhain fell to the dark, representing the end of summer and the beginning of shorter days and longer nights, culminating with the coldness and uncertainty of winter. This was quite a scary time for the Celts as the winter marked the end of the harvest, and the question of the community's livelihood came into play. If the harvest wasn't good, the possibility of starvation was apparent. The last day of the harvest and the celebration of Samhain was October 31st, and the next day, November 1st marked the beginning of winter. Samhain was also a festival of the dead. The Celts believed that on October 31st, the boundary between the living and the dead was thin. This allowed the recently dead, the dead of the past, and the fairies or spirits of gods and nature, to roam freely from their reality into ours. Let's take a look at what the scripture says about the dead.

Biblical Connotations

Ecclesiastes 9:5-6, 10 reads,

"For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest."

Verse 6 describes someone dead as never coming back in this life, so the idea of someone coming back to haunt is not biblical.¹ Job 14:10-12, Psalm 6:5 and Hebrews 9:27 give further credence to this fact. However what are these manifestations if not the people whom they seem to be? Revelation 12:9 says:

And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

2 Corinthians 11:14-15 states:

And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.

Job 1:7 reads:

And the Lord said unto Satan, whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, From going to and fro into the earth, and from walking up and down it.

¹ *Ghosts and Spooky Spirits*. Perf. Pastor Doug Batchelor. *Amazing Facts*. N.p., 8 Oct. 2011. Web. 25 Sept. 2013. <<http://www.amazingfacts.org/media-library/media/e/4424/t/ghosts-and-spooky-spirits.aspx>>.

Ephesians 2:2 says:

Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.

So we see that Satan was cast down with his fallen angels and that he can appear like an angel of light or make himself seem good and harmless. Satan can take the form of something that he is not to deceive. He and his fallen angels may assume the forms of spirits of the dead, goblins, demons or whatever else they may want to look like.¹ We know from Job that Satan roams the earth, and from Ephesians that he is the prince of the power of the air. We are wrestling against spiritual wickedness. (Ephesians 6:12) Satan and his fallen angels may be watching us and as a result, they may very well know certain idiosyncrasies about our deceased relatives.¹ But we know from Ecclesiastes that once you are dead, you don't come back in anyway. So to see a "ghost," is to see the manifestation of evil appearing as something that it is not for the purpose of deception. The Celts so called dead spirits and gods that were believed to roam on October 31 were in fact demons in disguise, deceiving.

Halloween's Origins with Celts and Romans Cont.

The Celts also believed that the shortening of the days and the longevity of the nights was a direct sign of their gods' power. In honor of their gods', bonfires were built and prayers were offered for the return of the sun. These fires attracted insects, which in turn attracted bats that would loom above in the darkness of the night. This may be why the bat has become iconic to Halloween.² These fires also served as a way to guide the souls of the returning dead, which the Celts believed needed help finding their way to the underworld. They believed that they may have wanted to visit the living on the way to the underworld. So, the fires served as both a beacon to welcome and drive them, as Celts didn't want the dead to become too comfortable.³ The dead who would roam would not all appear friendly, so in an effort to appease these unfriendlies, the Celts would march out to the edge of their villages with offerings such as food and sweets to influence the unfriendly away from their homes. Mumming and guising were done, in which participants went from door to door reciting verses in exchange for food, often in disguise to either imitate or hide from the spirits of the gods or fairies.⁶ This tradition would eventually become linked to the trick-or-treat aspect of Halloween, by dressing up, going from door to door asking for candy.⁵ The Celts also offered blood sacrifices in the form of animals and humans to their gods' on these bonfires to thank the earth for giving up its bounty during the harvest season.⁴ Their priests, known as the Druids, a pagan priesthood, read the burnt entrails of these sacrifices to determine who would live and who would die at the coming year. They believed that the "walking dead," free to roam from their dimension into ours, might know these future details. These prophecies of the Druid priests would spread to the community through the night, a tradition that may be linked to the ghost stories that are told on Halloween today.⁵ These very ancient traditions of Samhain are still celebrated today by Pagans, and the holiday is considered significant for them.

¹ *Ghosts and Spooky Spirits*. Perf. Pastor Doug Batchelor. *Amazing Facts*. N.p., 8 Oct. 2011. Web. 25 Sept. 2013. <<http://www.amazingfacts.org/media-library/media/e/4424/t/ghosts-and-spooky-spirits.aspx>>.

² *History Channel The Real Story of Halloween Parts 1-3*. YouTube. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CWZsH9Wras>>.

³ Morgan, Sheena. *The Real Halloween: Ritual and Magic for Kids and Adults*. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's, 2002. Print.

⁴ Schnoebelen, William. *Halloween: This the Season to Be Evil..* Dubuque, IA: With One [Accord](#) Ministries, n.d. PDF.

⁵ *The History Channel: The Haunted History of Halloween*. N.d. DVD.

⁶ "Samhain." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 25 Oct. 2013. Web. 26 Oct. 2013.

Biblical Connotations

Biblically speaking, the things believed and done on Samhain are abominations to God. In Deuteronomy 18:9-12 God warns His people saying:

When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord: and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee.

The sacrifices Druids performed can be compared to having a child “pass through the fire.” A “consulter with familiar spirits,” can be compared to the Druid priest who took counsel with the supposed dead who roamed. The example in 1 Samuel 28:6-19 and 1 Chronicles 10:13 where Saul consulted a woman that had a familiar spirit can also serve as a reminder for the Christian about not getting involved with such things. The roots of Halloween give enough evidence to the Believer in Christ that this day is not to be recognized in anyway shape or form.

Halloween’s Origins with Celts and Romans Cont.

Around the same time as the Celts, Romans were celebrating a night of mystical revelry known as Pomona, the name taken from the goddess of gardens and fruits known as Pomona. The celebration took place on November 1st in which Romans, as an expression of thanks to Pomona, laid out apples and other fruits, a tradition that is likened to what we know today as bobbing for apples.¹ In 50 B.C., the Romans conquered much of northern Europe spreading Pomona to the land of the Celts. Soon the Roman traditions of Pomona and the Celtic traditions of Samhain would converge. But at the turn of the 1st millennium, both traditions would become involved in a raging moral battle as Christianity began to spread.

How these Traditions were Preserved in Western Culture

As we have so far learned, the Celts and Romans were a paganistic people and the rest of the world was not far behind at the time. People worshiped spirits associated with nature, such as gods’ of water, trees, air etc. But how is it that these ancient pagan traditions of Samhain and Pomona still survive in our modern culture today? Halloween is commonly thought to have pagan origins, even though its etymology is Christian.² To the world today, the largest groups of Christianity are the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the denominations of Protestantism. So when we say that Halloween’s etymology is Christian, we are referring to the Catholic Church, from which the holiday originated. The Catholic Church, in an attempt to make Christianity more appealing, often encouraged Pagans to continue in their traditions while still upholding the traditions of Christianity. They were expecting pagans to be converted based on compromise, allowing them to still continue in their acts to other gods’, yet be faithful to the One True God.

¹The History Channel: *The Haunted History of Halloween*. N.d. DVD.

²Rogers, Nicholas. *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.

Matthew 6:24 says “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” Joshua 24:15 reads “And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve;...”

The Catholic Church and its Link to the Etymology of the Word Halloween

By the 8th century, the Christian Church (Catholic Church) had adjusted many of its own principal holy days to coincide with existing pagan festivals.⁴ Pope Gregory the III introduced All Saints Day on November 1st as a day of the Church to honor the most holy of Christians who were martyred by pagan emperors.¹ All Saints Day was an attempt to Christianize the pagan holiday of Samhain. All Saints day is also known as All Hallow’s Day; hallow meaning saint. The evening before all Hallow’s Day was called All Hallow’s Evening. Through a corruption of the word “evening,” we get the term Hallow’een.² Even though the Catholic Church tried to eradicate Samhain by introducing “Halloween,” many still practiced their traditions under this new name rather than under the name of Samhain. The Catholic Church in an even further attempt, made November 2nd to be All Souls Day, a day to remember not only the most holy of saints, but everyone who died in the last year. These new holidays bore striking resemblance to the aspects of Samhain in that the dead were honored. “The feast of All Saints’ and All Souls’ was one of the six days of obligation, marked by high masses and prayers...Its requiem masses also served as insurance against haunting, for ghosts were generally ‘understood to be dead relatives who visited their kin to rectify wrongs committed against them while alive and to enforce the obligations of kinship.’”¹ To a celebrant of Samhain, the Catholic prayers and masses of All Saints’ and All Soul’s power to ward off haunting ghosts, would no doubt seem appealing, as this was similar to a custom they were already carrying out on Samhain. In fact, these new holidays might seemingly have drawn these celebrants into the Catholic Church as the church intended. However, as we’ve already pointed out, the belief that people come back to haunt is unbiblical. Furthermore, the Bible gives no indication that the dead should be honored.⁵ Samhain’s spirits and the ghosts the Catholics believed in are demons. The notion of mass helping to ward of these demons, is like Satan trying to cast Satan out, which Jesus says is not so. (Matthew 12:25-30)

Americanization of Halloween

By the time the Puritans settled in the New World, they weren’t very fond of the holiday because its basis did not coincide with Biblical principles. However, as other settlers came over to the New World, the Puritans ideas scarcely permeated amid the growing secular society of new America. Even though Halloween was tolerated, the holiday didn’t really take root in America until the 19th century.

¹ Rogers, Nicholas. *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.

²The History Channel: *The Haunted History of Halloween*. N.d. DVD.

³ History Channel *The Real Story of Halloween Parts 1-3*. YouTube. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CWZsH9Wras>>.

⁴ Morgan, Sheena. *The Real Halloween: Ritual and Magic for Kids and Adults*. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's, 2002. Print.

⁵ *Ghosts and Spooky Spirits*. Perf. Pastor Doug Batchelor. *Amazing Facts*. N.p., 8 Oct. 2011. Web. 25 Sept. 2013.

North American almanacs of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century give no indication that Halloween was recognized as a holiday.² When it did take root however, it became a more secular festival whose supernatural divinations were turned into games, with the link to All Soul's and Saints day disappearing.² After the carnage of the Civil War whose end came in 1865, with so many soldiers dead or missing, America became obsessed with death.¹ People thought that these dead could come back, and started telling ghost stories about such things.

Immigrants Shaped Halloween in America

The Scottish and Irish began to immigrate to America after the Civil War, and they brought along their rural, old world customs about Halloween. One such tradition was that of the bogie, or boogie man, a pestering ghost bent on terrorizing children. Another tradition evolved into what we know today as the Jack-o-Lantern, derived from a person named Jack who was too bad even for hell. The devil threw him out, giving him an ember from hell's fires, which Jack placed inside a hollowed turnip. He became Jack of the Lantern, hence the word Jack-o-Lantern. Americans started to use pumpkins instead of turnips as their Jack-o-lanterns. Along with these traditions, immigrants also brought over the mischief of pranks, carried out by young boys that are all too synonymous with Halloween. These pranks initially were quite innocent. Year after year, however, the tricks began to get out of hand, causing destruction to cities when things were set on fire, rocks were thrown through the windows of buildings and cars, in rural communities wagons were taken apart and placed on top of houses, etc. Halloween became known as mischief or hell night. In an effort to avoid these mischievous and sometimes malicious tricks, homeowners bribed children by giving them homemade treats. In 1939, the phrase and custom of "trick or treat" turned up in print.¹ Instead of homemade treats, now kids began to get prepackaged candies. To further tame these very out of control children, schools, churches groups and rotary clubs took part in providing activities for children involving games, dances or costume contests.

Commercialization of Halloween

Some companies helped communities in diverting children from causing mischief by publishing Halloween guides, mass producing costumes and marketing other materials specifically for Halloween. Companies realized they could capitalize on this and as years went by, the demand for all things Halloween by the public became more and more urgent.

¹ *History Channel The Real Story of Halloween Parts 1-3. YouTube.* N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CWZsH9Wras>>.

²Rogers, Nicholas. *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.

Churches on Halloween

Many churches will provide Halloween alternatives. Children may be allowed to dress up as Moses, Noah, an angel or other biblical figures. The day is often used to host Halloween parties indoors to calm parent's fears about trick-or-treating in the neighborhood. The event is usually family oriented in nature. One such church is calling trick-or-treating truck-or-treating to lessen the mischievous undertones of Halloween.¹ However, as Children of God, we cannot take part in activities that don't glorify God. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says we must do all things to the glory of God. Participating in Halloween gives the adversary the opportunity to capitalize on a believers unawareness, and further give him that much more hold on the life of a Christian. Furthermore, to participate in activities related to this holiday, no matter how much you've changed or sugar coated them to seem less evil or menacing, indicates to the adversary that you agree with him. Any Christian participating in any aspect of Halloween is celebrating the foundation of satanic belief. Romans 6:13 says "Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God..."

A Final Note

It can be concluded that the origins of this seemingly harmless holiday of dressing up and getting candy has origins in paganistic traditions, which are not biblical. For the Child of God, this is not a holiday to take any part in because of its evil and satanic origins. I leave you with a word of encouragement from Paul to the Ephesians as he told them to continue in the things of God: "For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light...and have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them." (Ephesians 5:8, 11).

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¹ "Trick or Treat: Local Churches Provide [Halloween](#) Alternatives." *Amarillo.com*. N.p., 26 Oct. 2013. Web. 26 Oct. 2013.