

Halloween: Not Just for Pagans Anymore

Each year tracts and pamphlets are published exposing the pagan roots of Halloween. Everything about Halloween: the pumpkins with scary faces, dressing up, trick-or-treating, and even the bobbing for apples comes from paganism. Should we be like some churches and go to war against Halloween? Should we Lutherans scratch Halloween off our calendars and celebrate Reformation instead?

The tie between the Reformation of the Christian church and Halloween is quite accidental. In 1517 Martin Luther, a Catholic monk and college professor became fed up with the Catholic church's practice of selling indulgences to people with the promise that by buying them they got their sins forgiven. He wanted to start a debate on this subject. So he wrote 95 statements, or theses, about what he believed, and he posted them on the front door of the castle church. That was the town bulletin board.

He posted them on October 31st the day before All Saints Day which is November 1 because All Saints Day was a big church festival when many people would be in town. All Saints in Middle English is All Hallows. The evening before All Hallows, which would be October 31st, is All Hallows Even from which our word Halloween comes. It wasn't a special day to Luther or to the Church of his day. It was the next day, All Saints, that was special to them. But October 31st was always a big day among pagans. Let me explain why.

The primary gods of pagans were associated with the sun, so the big dates in their religious life were connected with solar events. The pagan new year began November 1st. On the eve of the new year, that is on October 31st, pagans believed the souls of the wicked dead rose to haunt the earth. Witches and warlocks, who consorted with the dead, were said to roam the countryside on this night too. Many specific Halloween traditions go back to the Celts, the ancient pagans of the British Isles. October 31st was their end of summer rite to appease the god of the dead. Later the Romans celebrated the last day of October as a harvest festival in honor of Pomona, goddess of orchards. People bobbed for apples in order to get an abundant crop from her.

The Celts warded off evil spirits with a hallowed out squash, turnip, or pumpkin with a scary face on it and a candle inside. Descendants of the Celts, the Irish, gave it the name Jack-o-lantern from a legend about a man named Jack. He got the devil mad at him by playing a trick on him, so at death he was condemned to walk the cold darkness of earth till Judgment Day. He asked the devil for at least a burning ember. The devil consented. Jack hollowed out a turnip and placed the ember in that. He made Jack's lantern, and if you say it with an Irish brogue you get Jack-o'-lantern.

The Celts had the practice of dressing up in costumes hoping the evil spirits would not recognize them as they went door to door exchanging harvest foods. But some say trick-or-treating came from pagan Ireland where people went house to house begging food for their god Muck Olla; it was sign of honor and devotion to gather the most food.

Halloween is still celebrated today. It has become a big party day across America. If I remember correctly more beer is sold for this holiday than all others except for 4th of July, but beer parties are not what makes Christians upset with Halloween. It's the fact that Halloween was and still is a holiday to pagans. October 31st is still celebrated today by pagans, Satanists, and witches. They still regard it as a day when evil stalks the earth uninhibited and the dead are especially accessible. Can we, should we, break the tie between Halloween and Reformation?

Our own Lutheran publications have frequently advocated this over the years: Have Reformation rather than Halloween parties. Send out your kids dressed as Reformation figures or Bible heroes rather than as devils, witches, and monsters. Carve your pumpkins with smiles or better yet with crosses or other Christian

symbols. And instead of giving out just teeth-rotting candy, give Gospel tracts too.

Dear friends, I ask you as one who at one time went along with this type of thinking, can we really battle Satan by tearing down plastic skeletons and shredding paper witches? Can we really strike a blow for Christ by substituting Reformation figures for Halloween monsters? Can we really Christianize a jack-o-lantern by knocking out its jagged teeth and making its eyes crosses instead of triangles? Don't such attempts at dealing with Halloween dishonor the Reformation heritage by not taking the devil seriously enough? All you have to do is look at the hymn "A Mighty Fortress" and you will see that Luther took the devil very seriously. The devil is the "old evil Foe" who has no equal on earth. "With might of ours" nothing can be done against him says Luther. Luther calls him the prince of this world following Scripture which calls him the ruler and god of this world.

You won't defeat a being who according to II Thessalonians is capable of "all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders" by dressing up your kids as Martin Luther rather than Freddie Kruger. If you think you can, then you are making the error Christ points out in Scripture. If an evil spirit is dealt with by anything less than Christ, the only One stronger and more powerful than him, the spirit leaves for a while only to come back with seven other spirits more wicked than himself.

But if Satan is so ferocious, so unstoppable, shouldn't we keep our children away from anything so closely connected to him as Halloween? If we do, then we fall prey to the other error: making it appear Satan has won, as if Halloween really did belong to him. We can give our kids the impression, much as the Pharisees of Jesus' day did, that the real danger to guard against is outward evil. As long as our kids stay away from Halloween, they're safe.

Furthermore, by leading them away from Halloween we may be leading them towards paganism. It is the pagans who believe that wicked spirits are free to roam the earth on Halloween doing as they please to us. To pagans it is a day when evil reigns. Among some, it has been known as All Evil Day.

It's pagans who react with fear to Halloween. We want our kids to react with faith. And we can help them by using rather than breaking the tie between Reformation and Halloween. We can teach our kids Halloween is not just for pagans anymore! We can tell our children that we don't have to do anything to defeat, trick or make friends with the Old Evil Foe. According to "A Mighty Fortress," for us fights the Sabaoth Lord, that means the Lord of angelic armies, and He holds the field forever. Our Jesus Christ is the One who was able to come up against Satan, the strong man, fully armed, guarding his house, holding us captive by the Law, sin and death. Our Jesus is stronger than the strong man. He has overpowered him, bound him, and set us free.

Satan, according to Hebrews 2, held us in bondage by the fear of death. We were at his mercy because we couldn't keep the Law of God, and God plainly said, "Cursed be everyone who does not keep the whole Law of God." We were at the devil's mercy because we are sinners and God had clearly said, "The soul that sins shall die." What defense did we have against the devil? We couldn't claim that we deserved God's help because we kept His Law. We couldn't claim that we deserved God's protection because we had made up for our sins.

"But for us fights the Valiant One, whom God Himself elected," we sing in "A Mighty Fortress." God the Father chose His only beloved Son to come and do battle with the devil. But He had to do battle in such a way as not to harm us hostages. God could have easily destroyed Satan on the spot, but Satan had the gun of damnation to our head because of God's perfect Law and our many sins.

So God the Son came down and put Himself under the Law keeping all of it. And He took responsibility for our sins making payment for them by His innocent suffering and death and by His holy precious blood. What Law can Satan now demand we keep? Show me one that Christ didn't already keep perfectly? What sin of ours can Satan demand we pay for? Show me one sin that Christ didn't

suffer for? Show me one sin that Christ's blood failed to cover completely?

On the day when pagans believe fear and death are in control, we Christians can teach our children to laugh secure in the everlasting life that is theirs through the forgiveness they have in Christ. Reformation has always been a celebration of the victory the Christian has in Christ over fear. What does Psalm 46, the Reformation Psalm, the psalm "A Mighty Fortress" is based on say? "Therefore, will not we FEAR."

And can't you hear the laughter in verse 3 of "A Mighty Fortress?" We laugh right in the devil's face in that verse even as our children laugh at ghosts, goblins, and witches on Halloween. We sing, "Though devils all the worlds should fill" even as they are said to do on Halloween, "We tremble not we fear no ill." Far from trembling, we dress up and go into the night and make fun of those defeated beings. "They shall not overpower us," we sing. Go ahead you witches cast your spells; Go ahead you demons stalk me all you want. You can harm me none. You're judged; the deed was done almost 2,000 years ago. You're ancient history.

O yes, "this world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will," as we sing. He may howl, he may frighten with tragedy, disease, death, and more. But "one little Word can fell him," we also sing. One little Word can bring Satan whimpering to his knees. That Word is Christ. In the Great Temptation, how long did Satan stay around after Christ said to him, "Begone, Satan?" He left so fast he forgot his pitchfork. But what about some of the truly terrible things that have happened on Halloween? The tampering with candy, the accidents involving kids, the alleged Satanic activity?. Doesn't this make you tremble and fear Satan's ill just a little?

A very careful reading of "A Mighty Fortress" will help here. Notice that while Luther, as Scripture does, considers Satan defeated, yet Luther, and Scripture too, still speak of his power in the present tense. "The old evil Foe now means deadly woe." "On earth is not (not was not) his equal." "This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will." This world is still under the domain of the evil one. We are still at war not against flesh and blood but against spiritual wickedness in the heavenly places. And this spiritual wickedness still brings awful sufferings, hardships, and deaths into this world even on Halloween. Luther recognized this too: He wrote the forces of evil may take "our life, goods, fame, child and wife."

But still victory would be ours. Why? "They yet have nothing won; The kingdom ours remaineth." We can laugh at Satan and his gang because no matter what they do in this life, they can't hurt, modify, or even touch our everlasting life. That is secure in Christ the Crucified. Even though our Crucified Lord appeared by all accounts to lose to Satan on Calvary, we know it was precisely at that point He won. So even when Satan appears to be winning in our life, he has "yet nothing won." Our everlasting life is so secure, that we can laugh and make fun of Satan regardless of what happens in this life.

To pagans, Halloween is a night where Satan rules. Let Halloween be for us Christians our night out against Satan. You're familiar with the "Night Out Against Crime" which happens each year in cities across America. Ordinary citizens take to the streets to show the criminals that on this night the streets belong to them. Well dear friends, Halloween is our "Night Out Against Satan." We are saying to him and all his spiritual thugs that we don't concede even this night to the forces of darkness. Halloween is not just for pagans anymore. Our God is our Mighty Fortress; He is our Shield and our Weapon. And He has redeemed us from sin, death and the power of the devil, even on Halloween. Amen

Rev. Paul R. Harris

Trinity Lutheran Church, Austin, Texas

Reformation Sunday (10-29-00) Luke 11:21-31