

Halloween

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Part 1

Halloween has become a major American holiday rivaling Christmas in economic importance. Traditionally, Christian churches have opposed Halloween for obvious reasons. It is a gory, violent, Satanic, pagan celebration. It encourages children to dress up as the devil, or ghosts, or ghouls, or witches. Adult women dress up like naughty nurses or French maids, inviting lewd sexual behavior. The holiday is an invitation to pretend to be evil, or actually be naughty. Trick-or-treat is basically extortion. If you don't give me a treat, I play some sort of trick on you. Mischief and vandalism have traditionally been associated with Halloween. There is no denying that Halloween is a really disgusting celebration of pagan origin. It is the most unholy holy day.

Consequently there has been a trend in recent years for some churches to schedule more wholesome activities on October 31 in direct competition with Halloween. Kids are going to do something on Halloween. It is better for them to be celebrating in a wholesome church atmosphere than for them to be going door to door taking candy from strangers and getting into trouble. I certainly applaud the intentions of churches that do this; but I can't help being concerned about the unintended consequences of Christianizing yet another pagan festival. They say, "The road to Hell is paved with good intentions." Christianizing Halloween could turn out to be a superhighway.

I want to approach this situation from two different directions. First, I want to begin by looking at what the Bible says about mingling pagan beliefs with pure Christianity. Second, I want to look at the history of the post-apostolic church to see what has been the result when pagan beliefs have been added to Christianity.

Biblical Perspective

King Solomon started out pretty well. God said he was the wisest man on Earth. But then he married heathen wives. To keep his wives happy, he compromised his faith and let them worship foreign gods. Over the years the Jews adopted more and more pagan customs which led them farther and farther from God, resulting in the Babylonian captivity. After the captivity, Ezra and Nehemiah rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem and the Jews worshipped God faithfully—for a while. They slowly adopted pagan customs and eventually God had to send the Romans to punish them. The Old Testament is filled with examples of backsliding induced by adopting pagan customs.

Turning to the New Testament, Chapter 15 of Acts describes a formal meeting of the Apostles to decide what to do about Gentile converts bringing their heathen customs into the church. Clearly more was said than what was recorded in the first 35 verses of that chapter, but the Bible tells us enough to recognize the four main criteria they established.

First, you don't have to be a Jew to be a Christian. You don't have to adopt the distinctly Jewish customs to be a member of the church.

Second, you do have to give up distinctly pagan customs. In particular, don't eat food sacrificed to idols.

Third, keep the Jewish dietary laws. God gave those regulations for good reason. God wants you to be healthy.

Fourth, abstain from sexual immorality.

The fact that the council didn't also say to abstain from theft and murder doesn't mean that Gentiles were permitted to steal and kill. Presumably that goes without saying. Sexual immorality, in those days, was considered to be an acceptable sin by worldly people, just as it is today. That's probably why it was specifically mentioned.

Modern society considers compromise to be a virtue; but God doesn't. The First Commandment doesn't say, "I am the Lord, your God, you shall have just a few other gods beside me, and only if they are good and wholesome gods." I was unable to find any verse in the Bible that justified compromising principles for any reason. If you can find one, I'd love to hear it.

Consider the story of the Woman at the Well in John, chapter 4. In particular, let us read verses 19 through 24.

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

Jesus had a golden opportunity to compromise here; but He didn't take it. If Jesus wanted to grow the church by adopting Samaritan beliefs, he would have said that it is OK to continue to worship on that mountain the way they always have. Instead, He told her that He had come to bring the pagans out of darkness into the light of the truth. He said, "... salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." The Father does not seek worshipers who worship in error.

Matthew, chapter 10, records the advice Jesus gave to the twelve disciples when they went out to preach the Gospel. As you listen to these verses, ask yourself, "Is Jesus encouraging his disciples to compromise and find some common ground?"

"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."

...

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn

**" 'a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,**

**a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—
a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'**

“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

The Bible is very clear. Do not strive for unity through compromise, even with close family members. Unfortunately, God's church has not always followed that advice.

We will be back to review what history has shown us when the church did compromise with pagan customs right after listening to Christian Edition sing, “I Will Follow Thee My Savior.”

Part 2

Historical Perspective

The church has previously Christianized three other pagan celebrations—Christmas, Easter, and Sunday. Today these are accepted parts of Christianity. Some could reasonably argue that Halloween should be no different. In light of that, let's review the history of how and why these three pagan festivals were adopted by the church, evaluate how that worked out, and then decide if it is appropriate to do the same with Halloween.

Christmas

Let's begin with Christmas, which today is the most beloved Christian holiday. Christmas is celebrated in America on December 25 because that was the ending date of a terrible week-long Roman festival called Saturnalia in honor of the Roman god Saturn. It's easy to find articles on the Internet about Saturnalia and the origin of Christmas, so we won't waste time repeating them now.

The Catholic Church celebrated Christ's Mass on December 25 to encourage pagans to honor Jesus instead of Saturn on that day. The Church claimed that Jesus was born on that day, even though shepherds would not have been watching their flocks by night at that time of year.

The Pilgrims, being devote Protestants, were strongly opposed to the celebration of Christmas because of its pagan origin. Christmas trees, holly, Yule logs, mistletoe, Saint Nicholas, and all the other pagan things that the Catholic Church adopted in conjunction with Christmas have nothing to do with Christ's birth. Christmas was actually illegal in the American colonies.¹ You can discover all this and more with a simple Internet search about the origin of Christmas.

But let's not get too distracted with all of that. The question is, right now, in the 21st century, did the attempt to Christianize Saturnalia work? Most people would probably agree that it did. The pagan origins are largely forgotten. It is largely successful at bringing awareness to the birth of our Savior.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_in_Puritan_New_England

But there are some down-sides to Christmas. Jesus is associated with Santa. Both are kind, generous figures with miraculous powers to make people happy. When children learn that Santa isn't real, they may think that Jesus isn't real, either.

Although gift-giving is good, the emphasis at Christmas can easily turn from what-will-I-give to what-will-I-get. There is no question that Christmas has been polluted by crass commercialism in recent years.

Associating Christ's birth with December 25 tends to limit our celebration of the incarnation. There are many wonderful songs about Christ's birth that are only played in December. "Joy to the World" is a great song with a wonderful message that should be played any time; but nobody plays it in August.

It's more than slightly ironic that three centuries ago conservative Christians were strongly opposed to Christmas because it is too pagan. Now those who oppose Christmas do so because the holiday is too Christian. They don't want nativity scenes in public places, or the Christmas story enacted in public schools. They object to children hearing about the birth of a real, historical figure, but don't object to school children learning about fictional characters like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny.

Easter

Speaking of the Easter Bunny, that brings us to the second pagan holiday the Church has co-opted. The spring festival named in honor of an ancient fertility goddess is now one of the two major Christian holidays. Since it is so easy to find information about the origin of Easter on the Internet, there's no need to spend much time on it here. Clearly the name of the holiday, the colored eggs, baby chicks, rabbits, fat pigs, and the day upon which it is celebrated, have nothing at all to do with Christianity and everything to do with fertility.

Just as we don't want people celebrating Halloween today, the early church didn't want people celebrating Easter. So, the church tried to Christianize the holiday by celebrating Resurrection Sunday on Easter Sunday.

Practically speaking, this has not have worked out as well as one might have hoped. It perpetuated the name Easter, and perpetuated the pagan fertility customs and symbols. Some churches even have Easter egg hunts. If the church had not associated the resurrection with Easter, those pagan rituals might have died out completely by now.

One of those pagan rituals is the traditional ham dinner. Fatness was traditionally associated with fertility and prosperity, so Easter was a time to eat a nice, fat pig. We wonder how God feels when He sees His professed followers celebrating His resurrection by eating food He specifically prohibited on a day named in honor of a pagan goddess. Neither Jesus nor the disciples would have dreamed of eating ham.

Well, that's not exactly true. Peter did dream of eating ham once; but it was more of a nightmare than a dream. The story is told in Acts, chapter 10. One afternoon, about 14 years after the resurrection, Peter was very hungry. He fell asleep while praying, and had a dream about food, which is understandable. Three times he was offered unclean meat to eat, and he refused it every time, despite his great hunger.

Some people think that Jesus abolished the distinction between clean and unclean meat. If that is true, why did Peter still make the distinction more than a decade later and refuse to eat it?

The distinction between clean and unclean meats isn't a Jewish cultural thing. It goes back before the flood. In Genesis, Chapter 7, verse 2 God told Noah to take animals on the ark. In particular, God said,

Of every clean beast thou shalt take to thee by sevens, the male and his female: and of beasts that are not clean by two, the male and his female.

If Noah didn't know which animals were clean, and which were unclean, how would he know whether to take 2 of them or 7 of them?

Then Genesis, chapter 8, verse 20 tells us what happened after the flood when they got off the Ark.

And Noah builded an altar unto the LORD; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar.

So, he sacrificed one of each of the clean animals, leaving three breeding pairs of clean animals, and one breeding pair of unclean animals. Noah knew the difference between clean and unclean animals long before Moses wrote it down.

So how did this rumor get started that Jesus abolished God's distinction between clean and unclean animals? It goes back to a misunderstanding of Mark, chapter 7, verses 1 through 23. This chapter describes an incident when the Pharisees and teachers of the law criticized the disciples for eating clean meat with unclean hands.

Although the Bible gives specific instructions about how to clean things that are contaminated by mildew and leprosy, it doesn't say anything about washing hands before eating. Of course, we want to encourage children to wash their hands before eating; but it isn't in the Bible. Because it isn't in the Bible, the Pharisees had established an elaborate ceremony to make sure hands were washed properly.

Although Jesus had ultimate respect for God's law, he didn't care a wit about human traditions, and neither did his disciples. So, the disciples ate with presumably clean, but ceremonially unwashed hands. The Pharisees naturally took this as a sign of disrespect to them, their authority, and their customs. They accused the disciples of being defiled because they had eaten clean food with unwashed hands.

Jesus came to their defense, and turned the tables on the Pharisees (as he often did). In effect, Jesus said, "My disciples aren't being defiled by what they are putting in their mouths; but you guys are being defiled by what comes out of yours." Jesus' remark about not being defiled by eating with unwashed hands has been widely misrepresented as Jesus endorsing the eating of unclean meats, which permits the eating of ham on Easter.

Jesus never sinned. He never broke a single one of God's laws. If He had eaten any unclean food, He would have been guilty of sin. If He had taught his followers that it was OK to eat unclean food, the Pharisees would not have needed to find false witnesses to testify against Jesus at His mock trial. They could have legitimately produced witnesses who would testify that Jesus had declared unclean meat to be clean, and there would have been many who could have confirmed it.

Jesus never sinned by eating unclean meat. He never taught His followers to sin by eating unclean meat. Peter never ate unclean meat. Acts chapter 15 tells us that the Apostles wrote to Gentile converts telling them that God's dietary laws applied to them, too. The traditional pagan ham dinner on Easter is an affront to God.

Did the attempt to Christianize Easter work? Most people would probably say it was only partially successful. Some pagan customs still remain. Pagan fertility symbols, which might have disappeared from our culture, live on. Jesus resurrection is polluted by celebrations involving rabbits, colored eggs, baby chicks, and ham.

Jesus resurrection that Sunday morning is perhaps the important pillar of our faith. There is something unsettling about celebrating it on a day named in honor of a pagan fertility goddess, no matter how sincerely one does it.

Sunday

The third pagan festival the church has Christianized is Sunday, the pagan day of worship. A simple Internet search will show that the Council of Laodicea changed the official Catholic day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday in 364 A.D. in compliance with Emperor Constantine's Sunday law of 321 A.D. The rationalization was that the church could get heathens who worshiped the sun on Sunday to honor Jesus' resurrection on Sunday instead.

There is no question that this was done with the best of intentions; but we aren't interested in intentions—we are interested in consequences.

Sunday worship certainly highlights Jesus resurrection on Sunday. That is unquestionably a good thing. But what is the cost?

The cost is disregard for the Fourth Commandment. God specifically says to keep the Sabbath Day holy to commemorate His rest following creation, and the rest He gave the Jews when He freed them from bondage. The New Testament book of Hebrews makes the argument that Sabbath also points forward to the rest God intends to give us when He recreates the world. There is a clear Biblical commandment to worship on Sabbath; and yet most Christians ignore Sabbath and worship on the Christianized day of Sun worship.

A few years ago there were several families who used to meet for worship in Ridgecrest. They were more of a political group than a Christian group. They didn't trust the government, so they had no bank account because they didn't want the government to know anything about their finances. They paid the rent for their meeting hall in cash.

This group considered itself to be very conservatively Christian. They had a one very heavily advertised meeting in which they encouraged the public to attend. So, I did. The one and only point the speaker made over and over again was that we should obey God rather than man. Any time man's law conflicted with God's law, we are duty-bound to disobey man's law. There are no exceptions. Custom and convenience never trump God's authority.

After the meeting I went up the speaker and suggested that surely there must be some times when it is necessary to follow human tradition rather than God's law. He adamantly insisted there was never a time when it is appropriate to obey man rather than God. So I asked him why they worship

on Sunday. He just got an angry look on his face and walked away. Clearly he knew they should be keeping Sabbath rather than Sunday.

They were an independent group. They weren't bound to some denominational government. They could meet whenever they wanted. They could have met on Saturday morning just as easily as Sunday morning—more easily, in fact. There are lots of churches that don't use their building at all on Saturday. They probably could have rented space from one of those churches for less than they were paying to rent on Sunday morning.

For them, meeting on Sunday really compromised their message. How can one believe a preacher whose primary message is that we must obey God and keep the Ten Commandments if his congregation needlessly and publicly violates the Fourth Commandment every week?

It isn't surprising to me that their group has since disbanded.

Sunday worship fits in well with secular culture. Some people who won't devote the whole Sabbath day to God will attend church for an hour on Sunday morning. It takes less commitment. So, from a practical point of view, meeting on Sunday does increase attendance.

Is convenience and increased attendance worth the cost? The majority opinion seems to be, "Yes." Many good Christians worship on Sunday, and that isn't likely to change; but that's not the issue we are dealing with today.

The question today is not "What should Christians do about Christmas, Easter, and Sunday?" The question is, "What should Christians do about Halloween?"

Halloween

It is certainly noble to want to clean up Halloween by making it a Christian holiday. But the Bible and history both tell us that the likely outcome is that it won't sanctify Halloween, it will just pollute Christianity. Who knows what witchcraft could enter the church through this door? As tempting as it is to try to Christianize Halloween, it just isn't a good idea.

The church tried to Christianize Christmas. It led to associating Jesus with Santa, and unbridled materialism. The church tried to Christianize Easter; and it led to disrespect for God's health laws. The church tried to Christianize Sunday worship; and it led to willful disrespect for the Ten Commandments.

If the church tries to Christianize Halloween, it just lets Satan worship get a foot in the church's door. In my opinion, it isn't worth the risk.