

**CHRIST AND THE POWERS OF DARKNESS:
A PERSPECTIVE ON HALLOWE'EN¹**

by Glen G. Scorgie, Ph.D.
Bethel Seminary San Diego

Introduction

Hallowe'en, that strange revel in the scary, is coming around again, and we Christians brace for it with a discomfort that grows by the year. In the first place, we are bewildered by how big it is becoming. Some of our neighbors are going overboard with lawn decorations and sound effects. Shopping malls exploit its commercial potential with more and more extravagant marketing. Parties are more common, adult participation on the rise, and costuming more elaborate. Television serves up an array of horror movies. Hallowe'en is often a major organizing theme in seasonal public school curriculum planning.

But if we are bewildered by Hallowe'en's expanding scale, we are also increasingly disturbed by evidence of its darker spiritual side. We are alarmed by newspaper accounts of occult activities and Satanic rituals, of sinister deeds and macabre crimes, and worry that Hallowe'en may be coming the Devil's "high day" on the annual calendar.

But here is our dilemma: We are reluctant to deprive our children of some of the seemingly more innocent dimensions of Hallowe'en that we ourselves enjoyed during childhood. We have good memories of dressing up, of greedy candy-collection, and even the exquisite spine-tingling excitement of very mild and controlled experiences of fear. Certainly we do not want to put our children at risk physically, psychologically or spiritually. Yet we do not want to be paranoid, and the last thing we wish to do is make our kids think of the Christian faith as a kill-joy, punitive affair. The practical and increasingly pressing question we face is: What are we as Christians going to do with Hallowe'en?

The Facts of History

In order to go forward wisely, we need first to look backwards thoughtfully, and to understand the roots of our contemporary Hallowe'en festival. I do not intend to be alarmist in any way, but the roots of Hallowe'en lie in pre-Christian Europe's annual commemorations of the reality of the spirit world. Like animists around the world, pagan Europeans needed little convincing of the reality of demons and spirits. They also believed that the spirits of the departed dead often lingered near their lifeless corpses, and even after burial might periodically return to "haunt" the present and influence the course of ordinary events. In other words, those early

¹Published as "Christ and the Powers of Darkness: A Perspective on Halloween," *The Standard*, October 1999, 27-31.

Europeans had a supernatural worldview that assumed the reality of spiritual forces (including the departed dead), and took it for granted that these forces were actively involved in the present. Pagan harvest festivals in the late Fall were times when the veil normally concealing this spiritual realm was drawn back to expose a veritable Pandora's Box of supernatural activity.

European Christianity grew in the midst of this pagan environment. The ambitious goal of the Christians in these centuries was nothing less than the transformation of pagan culture. They knew that the old ways could not simply be suppressed; they realized that alternatives had to be provided. Consequently one of their standard strategies for "getting traction" in a culture was to provide "sanctified substitutes" for existing pagan events. What we now know as Christmas and Easter are classic, and relatively successful, examples of such strategy.

Unfortunately, the Church was never quite so successful in its attempts to transform European paganism's annual acknowledgments of the spirit world into a Christian festival honoring the inspiring memory of departed saints (which is what All Saints Day, November 1, was designed to do). The purified Christian idea should have been that remembering the now-dead saints can inspire us to imitate the character and exploits of these our heroes. The church should have insisted that this is as far as the saints' influence goes; they themselves do not actually return.

But old notions die hard. For whatever reason (and the regrettable Medieval practice of praying to the saints could not have helped), the night before All Saints Day (Holy Evening, Hallowed Evening, or as we know it, Hallowe'en) was commonly viewed as a spooky time when the spirits of the departed dead came back for ghostly visits.

But it had never been just the spirits of the dead that were thought to be circulating at this time; other spirits (sprites, goblins, demons) were also thought to take this opportunity to rise from the netherworld below to create mischief and evil. When you stop and think about it, the Church's attempt to transform this old way of fearful, superstitious thinking by focusing on the saints was really quite inadequate. With Christmas and Easter, the Church rightly focused on Christ, and his birth and resurrection specifically. When it came to Hallowe'en, the Church blundered badly. As history has proven, the saints were a weak and inadequate substitute for the powerful, risen Christ. Unredeemed and unenlightened humanity lives with a crippling dread and anxiousness about death and those mysterious powers that elude scientific and material analysis. Nothing less than an exaltation of Christ as Victor can liberate us from this default setting in our psyches.

There is more than marketing and advertising behind the growing significance of Hallowe'en. The scientific worldview, which sneers at the supernatural and the miraculous, and which has prevailed for a good long while here in the West, is now in decline. There is a growing openness to the paranormal and the supernatural, even a soul-starved hunger for it. The lid is coming off Pandora's box. The church can run, but it cannot hide.

Grasping the Truth

It was C. S. Lewis who wrote insightfully in his *Screwtape Letters* that “there are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors . . .” (p. 3). In a parallel way we could say that there are two dangers into which Christians can fall with respect to occult forces and the attention they receive around Hallowe’en: to minimize their reality, and to be paralyzed with fear concerning them.

There are two relevant and important biblical affirmations we need to keep in mind. The first is the reality, yet limited influence of, evil powers. Evil spiritual forces do exist, as countless biblical references attest. Christians ought to be alert to their presence (I Cor. 7:5, 2 Cor. 2:11, Eph. 4:27, I Peter 5:8) and use the whole armor of God to counter them (Eph. 6:10-17). At the same time caution and discernment ought to be used in attributing blame to the Devil. There are, after all, also the world (the humanly-created systems that encourage evil) and the flesh (the inner vulnerability to wrong within each of our hearts) arrayed against us. The paradigm of spiritual warfare between angels and demons is, by itself, simply insufficient to account for all that happens in life.

The second biblical truth is even more important. The early church proclaimed it in its joyful motto “Christ is Victor!” and what they meant by this was that Christ’s triumph over Evil and our worst fears is truly worth celebrating. For one thing, as the book of Job illustrates, evil forces have always been restrained by the sovereign authority of God Almighty. But now, more to the point, since his decisive death and resurrection, Christ is Victor! I know from personal experience that we tend to think of evil forces as more powerful and present than those of God. Usually we respond to a discussion of powers of evil with terror. We need to recognize that the battle is an uneven playing field. Frank Peretti’s novel *This Present Darkness* (1986) is more Manichean (that is, dualistic) than biblical in its painting of the spiritual situation as a competition between two more or less equal opponents. In truth the foe has been vanquished; it is more like they are just playing out the clock down on the football field. The strong man has been bound by Christ and his house is routinely being plundered. Satan is attempting a hopeless hold-out resistance operation. We are liberated from our fear of death and the devil (Heb. 2:14-15). In an aged fixated on demons and paralyzed by fear, Martin Luther wrote, in the words of *A Mighty Fortress*:

And though this world with devils filled
Should threaten to undo us
We will not fear for God has willed
His truth to triumph through us.

The prince of darkness grim
We tremble not for him
His rage we can endure
For lo his doom is sure
One little word shall fell him.

The true ethos of Christianity has always been a buoyant celebration of the triumph of the Son. Moreover, the church is destined to extend Christ's victory over Evil, and the security of obedient believers creates amazing confidence. And just for the record, we also need fear no "accidental infection" by demons, nor believe that there is any such thing as an "ancestral claim" by the devil on anyone.

Hallowe'en Options for Christians

Without a doubt there are recognizable vestiges of Europe's pagan past in our contemporary popular observance of Hallowe'en. The popular shout of "trick or treat" reflects the age-old superstition that spirits with mischief on their minds need to be appeased with gifts. Wearing masks is rooted in the notion that evil spirits may be warded off by disguising oneself as one of them. And the Druids—European pagans—had sacrificial bonfires. Witches are witches. Fortune-telling is occult.

The fact that in the recent past Hallowe'en has been a largely-benign and enjoyable event is something to be thankful for. In part it can be attributed to the skeptical attitude of modernity towards all suggestions of supernatural phenomena. More significantly it can be attributed to the triumph of the light of Christ over the darkness of superstition. The church, and to some extent the society it has influenced, has come to feel less intimidated by evil and been able to stare it in the face. Consequently it is not necessarily wrong for parents and their children to participate in certain aspects of Hallowe'en. Each situation must be evaluated separately.

However, with both Christian faith and secular modernity back on their heels in some regions and neighborhoods of North America nowadays, the Hallowe'en experience is becoming more dangerous and sinister. Children can be vulnerable to malicious acts. Experiences of fear can be excessive and traumatic. There may be an unwholesome highlighting of evil persons and powers, which is particularly undesirable in view of the fact that Satan's main tactic is the power of suggestion and toothless intimidation; in such instances even mature Christians (never mind the impressionable younger ones) can stumble badly. In view of these realities, there will be instances when responsible parents will guide their children towards church-sponsored alternative events on the evening of October 31--"harvest festivals" complete with wholesome games, contests, entertainment, prizes and mounds of sugar-dense candy.

But good and legitimate as such an option may be, it does little more than buy us some time as the darkness encroaches. Evil and superstition will relentlessly advance to dominate the post-modern experience of Hallowe'en unless the Church clearly and strongly articulates some positive alternative themes. Until this occurs negative ideas will continue to fill up the ideological and spiritual vacuum.

We have noted how the Church's historic strategy was to offer an alternative memorial to the heroism and inspiring example of Christians of previous generations—the "cloud of witnesses" who have gone before. We are a leveled society with precious few heroes, and contemporary

psychologists have begun to document compelling evidence that strong, resilient young people—those who can stay strong in hostile environments—must have heroes, mentors and models (Michael Jordan is not enough!) after whom to pattern their own lives. They need to know something of the great men and women of the Christian tradition, of their courage and of how they faced death fearlessly and triumphed over it and the powers of evil. And for this reason it may be advisable to consider again this traditional strategy for re-Christianizing Hallowe'en.

Yet history tells us loud and clear that by itself this is not enough. The principalities and powers have thrown down a gauntlet too substantive to be countered by a mere remembering of merely-human saints. We must have a Christocentric celebration. We have to put “Christ is Victor” back on our unfurled banners. We must marshal our creative energies to find fresh ways to celebrate Christ’s mighty victory over death and the occult, and over all of our deepest-seated fears. We must apply our God-given creativity to honor the Lord Jesus Christ who brings spiritual light and dispels darkness and superstition in a profoundly liberating way.

Some years ago I visited a very old country *kirk* (church) in Scotland for a candlelight Christmas Eve service. The little centuries-old stone building was in a darkened field right down by the shore of the pounding North Sea. During the service a friend pointed out to me in the wall of the sanctuary where some stones from an ancient Druid altar had been deliberately incorporated as a declaration of the congregation’s confidence in Christ’s triumph over the powers of darkness. Those old Scottish Christians’ faith and confidence made a profound impression upon me. Whether the story is factual or not (and I was unable to confirm it), I know that it rings true to the spirit of bold, authentic Christianity.

Sure, we want to protect our children. But we can also dare to think bigger, and envision ways that this increasingly sinister annual event called Hallowe'en can be “redeemed.” The tables can be turned, and the pagan thing can be transformed to bring honor and glory to Jesus Christ. As our culture modulates into a postmodern chord, this is the time. Like the early church, let us learn to announce with courageous hearts and firm conviction and real passion: *Christus Victor!*

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