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What is Halloween?

Halloween is All Hallows Eve which falls on 31st October and refers to the day before All Saints Day (November 1st).

For many years in the northern hemisphere, many different festivals have been associated with gathering in the harvest, preparing for winter, remembering loved ones who have died, and preparing for the time of longer nights and winter cold.

What happens at Halloween?

Modern Halloween in the UK probably has a background in these traditions, but today it owes much more to the commercialisation of 31st October in the United States as ‘Happy Halloween’, a major celebration in which whole neighbourhoods decorate their houses, organise dressing up costumes for children, buy or make sweets, baked goods, or have barbecues and cook outs.


In the UK, the commercialisation of Halloween shows shops offering costumes, pumpkins, sweets, cakes and party objects. Shops aim these things at children as their consumers. The pressure to consume Halloween paraphernalia relates to a number of different areas:

- **Dressing up** – typically as something deemed ‘scary’, - witches, vampires, demons, zombies, ghosts, skeletons, serial killers from films etc.
- **Decorating** – carving pumpkins, artificial spider webs, glow in the dark faces or weapons, masks etc. Typical colours for the ‘theme’ are orange and black.
- **Trick or Treating** – going from house to house after dark, knocking on doors, asking for sweets or other gifts. (And in some cases rewarding silent houses with ‘tricks’ such as egging).
- **Parties** – Halloween parties can combine all of the above in one location as an organised party or as a base for trick-or-treating. There are various games like apple bobbing that are often played at Halloween.

### Why some Christians are concerned about Halloween

The evangelist Canon J.John has put together a list of concerns about Halloween [http://www.mirror.co.uk/opinion/news-opinion/reverend-j-john-six-reasons-2486777](http://www.mirror.co.uk/opinion/news-opinion/reverend-j-john-six-reasons-2486777) His six reasons for concern are:

**Halloween celebrates evil** – at best it sends mixed messages about the 'scary' side of life; at worst it glorifies evil things which we should guard children against.

**Halloween is unhelpful** – we should safeguard children, not tell them to go out in the dark and knock on strange doors.

**Halloween trivialises bad things** – killing, wounding and hurting people are serious matters, yet dressing up as dead, deformed or wounded people makes them seem something to laugh about.

**Halloween is offensive** – able-bodied people dressing up to look disfigured or ugly for a laugh is offensive to people who have suffered serious disfigurements.

**Halloween is getting worse** – it is getting 'darker' and 'nastier' year on year

**Halloween allows evil a victory** – some earlier traditions included a triumph of good over evil at Halloween, but this element is now missing.

More reflections on these points can be found at: [http://www.canonjjohn.com/blog/2014/10/27/the-tragedy-of-halloween](http://www.canonjjohn.com/blog/2014/10/27/the-tragedy-of-halloween)

### Christian approaches to Halloween

Some Christians feel strongly that Halloween doesn’t mix with Christian faith and practice and keep their children firmly indoors and away from all that is going on in their neighbourhood. However, it is difficult for children to avoid party invitations, activities in schools, hearing about what other children are going to be doing or from seeing all the consumables in shops. What can we do then? There are various things to think about:

- What does Halloween look like from the child’s point of view?
- What can be done to minimise the problems Canon J John points out?
- How can you change the way Halloween is going?
- What can churches do?
What does Halloween look like from the child’s point of view?

The fun for children includes the anticipation and expectation of a party atmosphere. The best bits are dressing up in a special costume with face paint or disguises, so as to look different and the chance to act a part. It also includes facing things which are ‘scary’ by becoming them or handling them in a safe way (e.g. fluffy spiders). Another exciting element for children is the journey in the dark and being given delicious presents of things to eat.

What can be done to minimise the problems Canon J John points out?

One of the useful things J John does is to ask us to reflect on what messages we are giving children when they get involved in Halloween activities. It is surely common sense not to encourage children to go out in the dark by themselves and knock on strange doors. And we don’t want to suggest that it is ok to frighten people or damage their property because you don’t get what you want. It is also surely common sense to take steps not to trivialise disfigurement or to glorify pain and suffering. Nor would we want to frighten or distress others or to encourage evil behaviour. Another issue is to be aware of the commercialisation of Halloween and not get sucked into the trap of buying huge amounts of stuff just because it’s 31st October.

A more serious reflection asks us to make sure that children are not invited to see evil ideas and behaviour as attractive, glamorous or worthy of further exploration. Further, anyone suggesting that Halloween parties include playing Charlie Charlie, using Ouija boards or other séance-style ‘games’ to contact spirits, should be strongly advised not to get involved with any activities of this kind as they can lead to serious spiritual and psychological problems.

How can you change the way Halloween is going?

It is perfectly fine to keep well away from Halloween, but one of the challenges of faith is the way in which we face the challenges of our culture. So as Christians, we can surely also find ways of changing the unhealthy messages of Halloween and give our children new tools to engage with it. These tools can include: transformation, light, and gift-giving.

Transformation of the things which worry some Christians

As Canon J John notes, Halloween used to have an important theme of celebrating the victory of goodness and love over all that is evil – and we can do that too. One way of doing that is to put an element of transformation into the activities for children. If children enjoy dressing up and having their faces painted, why not find ways to transform ‘spooky’ costumes into ones which are beautiful and expressive of God’s love? After all, this is how much traditional folk and fairy story works, as evil is defeated and goodness triumphs.

You can do this as a creative project with the children, or make it part of the ‘pilgrimage’ in the dark, adding layers of costume or decoration to transform the children as they return home. If children turn up with pretend weapons and fake blood these too can be transformed (transformation sends a stronger message than just replacement).

The Halloween party can also be re-themed into one that looks forward to All Saints Day.
Using Halloween to establish light in the darkness

Another important theme is safety and light. J John makes the sensible point that we should not suggest that it is ok to go out in the dark to strange places and knock on strange doors. Children enjoy going out in the dark, but they can only enjoy God’s good darkness if they know they are safe, know they are on a journey which has a particular end and have access to light, such as torches or safety lanterns, in the darkness.

Many children have or will have had, a fear of the dark at some time in their lives, and the Halloween journey around their streets, properly managed, can be a useful way of facing this (this can be organised not just at Halloween but at any time when it is dark). The important message about this is the need to stay safe in dark places (including what to do if you get lost) and to come back to the light, which can be an important feature of the return journey.

Games with the themes of light and darkness can be found at
http://www.thegoodbook.co.uk/a-friend-in-the-dark
This leaflet looks at Jesus as light of the world and addresses being afraid of the dark.

Changing trick-or-treating to gift-giving

Finally, you can subvert the trick-or-treating element of Halloween by getting rid of the ‘trick’ element and giving gifts instead of just expecting to receive them. It is worth pre-arranging with people you know in your neighbourhood when you will arrive with children and get the children to spend time making small gifts or baking cakes. Turning Halloween into a gift-giving event takes away from the expectation of getting something for nothing and helps children think about the pleasure of visiting people with gifts.

What can churches do?

There are already some projects and events which churches put on as alternatives to Halloween. For example Scripture Union has suggestions on how to run a Light Party.

The Carve a Heart Campaign from World Vision offers a chance to carve a heart into a pumpkin and donate to help children living in fear – of hunger and poverty and to transform their lives.
http://www.worldvision.org.uk/get-involved/carve-heart/