

Unmasking Halloween

Amid black witch hats and orange pumpkins, the darkness of fall crept in with the trembling voice of a pastor, calling me from his hospital bed the morning after Halloween.

The night before, Jeff's (not his real name) church was "celebrating" their annual "Haunted Sanctuary Night." As part of the "decoration," he had been tied up and hung in a fake noose from the rafters. Below, church members and their children stepped warily through a black-walled "graveyard" maze of pews while costumed skeletons and ghosts leapt out at them. Amid spooky howls and morbid organ music, suddenly the noose rope snapped and Jeff fell twenty feet, striking his head on the concrete and narrowly escaping death.

Listening on the phone, I muffled a deep sigh and prayed for wisdom. Some years before, Jeff had confided in me that he had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but had never told his congregation, for fear they would reject him. "You've been baptized into the supernatural reality and power of God's Spirit," I reminded him. "The Enemy of God, who animates Halloween, has been after your life ever since.

"Please, brother," I begged him, "don't hand it to him on a silver platter. This is not a matter of church theology, but of life and death."

From drug store racks to office parties, this annual invasion of sinister masks and images heralds a showcase for evil, as deliberately dark spirituality takes center stage among us. In our money-driven culture, this "season" has in fact become so popular that Halloween marketing sales now rival those of Christmas. The graphic contrasts here frame the cosmic contest at hand: death, dark masks, and the effort to conceal vs. birth, bright lights, and the effort to reveal; pranks and bad deeds, as powers of destruction are given rein vs. gifts and good deeds, as the saving power of the Creator is welcomed.

The word Halloween comes from an abbreviated "All Hallows Eve," or All Saints Day, instituted when the early Church decided to commemorate past Christian heroes of the faith. Bowing to pagan sensibilities--even as Jeff to his spiritually ignorant congregation--the Church coordinated the date to coincide with the November 1st New Year celebrated by ancient pagan Druids in Western Europe.

On their October 31st New Years' Eve, Druids extolled the "Lord of the Dead," who was believed to summon on that night the spirits of all wicked persons who had died in the previous year and been condemned to live in animals--as the proverbial black cat. For this one night, those departed spirits returned to their original bodies and homes expecting to be honored by the living with gift offerings. Otherwise, those evil spirits would spread curses, casts spells, cause damage and torment the populace. Hence, "trick or treat."

From its beginnings, therefore, Halloween has been a wolf in sheep's clothing among us, an occasion which purports to honor Christian saints, but which in fact pays homage--and extortion/blackmail--to evil spirits.

Jesus did not negotiate with demons, nor are God's plans achieved by placating them. Today, however, our secularized, materialistic culture effectively does this--even as many churches, like Jeff's--in not even daring to acknowledge the active reality of evil among us. "This present age since the coming of Jesus is a new dispensation," goes the conservative/evangelical rationalization, "when the spiritual realities of biblical times no longer apply. It happened then, but it doesn't happen now."

Liberal/universalists, on the other hand, prefer condescension. "The healings, miracles, demons, and other supernatural phenomena portrayed in the Bible," they scoff, "are just literary figures of speech to accommodate an ancient, less educated readership. It didn't happen then, and it doesn't happen now."

Christians foster this much-ballyhooed "liberal vs. conservative" charade because it distracts us from the humbling fact that the greatest of our natural human powers is no match for the least of spiritual powers. We all know this because, from unsettling dreams to death itself, we all experience it. The shame of this primal human inadequacy, however, stirs an addictive denial that keeps even the most sincere Christians, whether liberal or conservative, from facing the reality of evil--and thereby, from recognizing its handiwork in Halloween unto today. Intoxicated with worldly conceit, we dismiss it all as "nothing but superstition"--and then we're startled when "treats" for children dressed as demons begin to include razor blades in apples and hallucinogenic drugs in candy.

Thus, we sacrifice our children's innocence on the smug altar of human pride and control. In fact, we'd rather abdicate supernatural reality to the devil than face our desperate need for saving power.

As the Son of God, meanwhile, Jesus "appeared for this very reason: to destroy what the Devil had done" (I John 3:8b), and to demonstrate thereby that "the Spirit who is in you is more powerful than the spirit in those who belong to the world" (4:4).

The enforced ignorance of our "modern" materialistic worldview offers neither protection nor excuse. Those who fancy that smoking is just a harmless pleasure, as the early tobacco company ads reassured, nevertheless contract lung cancer--and indeed, infect others with their second-hand smoke. As Paul exhorted the early Christians, immersed in a pagan culture not wholly unlike our own today,

"You yourselves used to be in the darkness, but since you have become the Lord's people, you are in the light. So you must live like people who belong to the light... Have nothing to do with the worthless things that people do, the things that belong to the darkness. Instead, bring them out into the light...(so) their true nature is clearly revealed...So be careful how you live. Don't live like ignorant people, but like wise people...because these are evil days" (Ephes. 5:8-10,15 TEV).

Those called to reflect the light of Jesus, that is, face greater consequences for accommodating the darkness--as Jeff discovered. Yet our culture today weighs in so heavily that it's often hard to maintain safe Christian boundaries.

When my son was about three, he became captivated by all the Halloween images, and so I taught him about the "bad angels" which "make it scary." Still, he wanted very much to participate in the costumes and parties, so I said I'd take him to a local church for a suitable alternative: a "no bad guys" costume party to celebrate historic Christian heroes.

Very early that evening, he was already dressed in his Peter Pan outfit, and begged to go trick-or-treating around our neighborhood. I balked, but he persisted--"It's not even dark yet, Daddy!" Eventually, I relented, and agreed to let him visit "only our two neighbors' houses, and no more!"

Later, after the second house, as my son clutched his bag of candy, Mary and I hustled him down the sidewalk toward our home next door. For a brief moment, she and I pulled ahead of him to chat. Suddenly, we heard behind us a Thunk! and loud scream. Turning, we found our son sprawled on the concrete. As we rushed to pick him up, we saw his upper teeth had cut into his lower lip, which was now bleeding profusely. We dashed home and into the bathroom. I had barely wiped the blood from his whimpering mouth, when it hit me like a ton of bricks. As Mary (a nurse, thankfully) took over, I ran out to the living room and fell to my knees, crushed. *Oh Father, please, please, forgive me!*

The Enemy of God hates children, because, like Jesus, they restore innocence to a fallen world. But in order to destroy the children, the Enemy must first deceive the adults.

The Bible was written for evil days, even our own. Let's stop bowing to darkness and ignorance, and speak the truth to a world held hostage by shame and fear: Jesus came to bear our sinful nature, so we could receive God's Holy Spirit and faithfully exercise His power over unholy spirits. It happened then, and it happens now--to all who choose to walk in His light.