

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, October 29, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### **DEUTERONOMY 18:9, 12, 13**

“When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there... Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord... You must be blameless before the Lord your God.”

### **WHAT IS HAPPY ABOUT HALLOWEEN?**

I must confess that Halloween has never turned me on. Indeed, I well remember as a very small boy being utterly terrified by those awful “false faces” that appeared at our front door, and the weird noises that came forth from those ugly lips!

Of course, some people might wonder why I want to “deprive little children of all the fun and excitement of a holiday that is a special time to them.” Well, there is more than one reason.

The Encyclopedia Britannica tells us that “immigrants to the United States, particularly the Irish, introduced secular Halloween customs that became popular in the late 19th century. Mischief-making on this occasion by boys and young men took such forms as overturning sheds and outhouses and breaking windows.” And trees were festooned with toilet tissue until they looked like giant Christmas trees! But now Halloween has become an increasingly dangerous night. And it’s not due to ghosts and hobgoblins. Each year more vandalism occurs and more property is damaged. Older children beat up younger children. Much worse is what some sick adults are doing — putting hallucinogenic drugs in candy, or razor blades in apples. You’ve heard the horror stories.

But that’s not the only reason I question this particular holiday. It is an evening of evenings! We do some bizarre things on Halloween, don’t we? — dressing up as witches and demons and fairies and pirates -- calling on people and demanding goodies. I wonder if we know why we do these things. Why do we go along with it? “Because it’s tradition,” we say. But that isn’t a good enough reason.

Let me put it this way. The Passover celebration in a Jewish home begins when the youngest son asks his father, “Daddy, why is this night different from all other nights?” Then the father tells him of the mighty works of God surrounding the Exodus of Israel from Egypt -- the avenging angel, the slain lamb, and the blood sprinkled upon the sides and tops of the doorframes. But what would you say if your son or daughter were to ask you about Halloween, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” How would you explain the shenanigans of Halloween?

Most people know that the word itself comes from “All Hallows Eve,” the evening before “All Hallows.” Now “All Hallows” was the mediaeval term for “All Saints Day” - the occasion when the Roman Catholic Church commemorates all the saints of the church, both known and unknown. So “Halloween” has something to do with “All Saints” and the Christian Church. But

what?

It comes as quite a surprise to discover that this celebration predates the Christian Church by several centuries. In fact, it goes back to a practice of the ancient Druids in Britain, France and Germany, who lived hundreds of years before Christ was born. This celebration honored one of their deities, Samhain, Lord of the Dead. On the last day of October, the eve of the Celtic new year, Samhain called together all the wicked souls who had died within the past twelve months. It was believed that these wicked souls at death had been condemned to inhabit the bodies of animals. But on October 31 Samhain called them all together. It was the time of falling leaves and general seasonal decay, and it seemed appropriate to celebrate death. That's what it was -- a celebration of death. It honored the god of the dead and the wicked spirits of the dead. The Druids believed that on this particular night the souls of the dead returned to their former homes to be entertained by the living. If acceptable food and shelter were not provided, these evil spirits would cast spells, cause havoc and terror, and haunt and torment the living. They demanded to be placated. And that was the beginning of "trick or treat"! Evil spirits demanded a "treat." If they didn't get it, you got a "trick"!

James Napier, the anthropologist, tells us that those beliefs and practices were not confined, to Britain, Ireland, France and Germany, but were widespread and, with some variations, were practiced the world over by pagan peoples. In Cambodia, for example, people used to chant, "Oh, all you our ancestors who are departed, condescend to come and eat what we have prepared for you, and bless your posterity to make it happy." In Mexico, jars of food and drink were set on a table in a central room, and then the family went out with torches to greet the evil spirits and, bid them come in. Then they would kneel around the table and pray to these spirits to accept their offerings.

But how did all this become associated with Christianity? Well, there's another part of the Halloween story that goes back to the city of Rome. You have all heard of the Roman Pantheon, one of the great temples of the city. It was built by the Emperor Hadrian about A.D. 120 in honor of the goddess Cybele and various other Roman deities. It became one of the principal places of worship, where Roman pagans prayed for their dead. Then Rome was sacked in A.D. 410, the barbarians poured in, and they took over the Pantheon, along with everything else. After two centuries, it had fallen into disrepair, but in A.D. 607 it was recaptured by the Emperor Phocas, and he turned it over as a gift to Pope Boniface IV.

Boniface re-consecrated the Pantheon to the Virgin Mary. This was part of a general policy that wherever pagan celebrations were well established, they would be continued and incorporated into Christian worship. Only the names were changed — Cybele became Mary! So, if you worshipped a certain god or goddess, and you were conquered and "Christianized," you could continue that same celebration, only now you would offer your worship to one or another of the saints. This was an appalling way to "evangelize," but it was effective if you were interested only in numbers. Today, in Africa, the Roman Catholic Church is taking old pagan tribal rites and weaving and incorporating them into the liturgy and practices of the church in the attempt to make the transition from paganism as easy and palatable as possible. But such a strategy is a far cry from the affirmation of the Apostle Paul when he says, "If anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new"

(2 Corinthians 5:17).

So, you see, no longer were Roman pagans gathering to pray to the goddess Cybele for their dead. Now the Roman Catholics were gathering to light candles and pray to the goddess Mary for their dead. And they did this in the Pantheon and in the 400 other temples in Rome.

Now for two centuries the major celebration in the Pantheon took place in the month of May each year and was called "All Saints Day." Then in A.D. 835 it was deliberately moved to the first day of November. Why? In order to coincide with those ancient Druidic and pagan practices that had been going on for more than a thousand years. The Roman Church wanted to accommodate the recently conquered German Saxons and the Norsemen of Scandinavia. So, it made this pathetic attempt at "Christianizing" a pagan festival.

That was how the wedding took place between All Saints Day and Halloween. Here was something that was thoroughly and totally pagan: the worship of the dead, the placating of evil spirits, the honoring of Samhain, the Lord of the Dead; the transferring to Mary of pagan esteem that was previously given to Cybele.

Now where does that leave us?

**1. First, there IS an appropriate way of honoring the "saints" who have gone before us,** but it is not to pray to them. Nowhere in Scripture are we invited to pray to the saints. We are to honor them, certainly, and we are to praise God for their good examples that encourage us. In Hebrews 12:1 the writer tells us that we Christians here on earth are surrounded by a great unseen cloud of witnesses in heaven -- our Christian brothers and sisters, that immortal throng who now comprise the Church Triumphant in glory. But notice, they are not witnessing us -- I don't believe your godly father or mother in heaven knows what you are doing down here on earth. They are not witnessing us, but they are witnessing to us, and they are saying, "Hang in there; keep looking to Jesus; it's worth it." When I look at my dear father's picture as it faces me on my study desk, it gives me courage and challenges me to the kind of commitment he had to his Lord and Savior.

You remember how Mary had confessed herself to be a sinner, just like you and just like me. You remember how in the Magnificat she called God her "Savior" (Luke 1:47). Only a sinner needs a Savior; and after His resurrection and ascension Mary worshipped her Son along with all her fellow believers. It would horrify Mary to have us pray to her. The Scripture says, "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6). It is idolatry and blasphemy to pray to human beings, no matter how good they might have been. It is idolatry and blasphemy to ask them to intercede for us before the Father. That role of Intercessor is reserved for the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and for no other.

**2. Second, we are nowhere given any warrant to pray FOR the saints.** The whole notion of praying for the saints comes from the doctrine of purgatory. But Scripture doesn't teach that at the moment of death a Christian goes to a place of cleansing called "purgatory" where he may have to spend thousands of years "cleaning up his act," before he is ready for heaven. The Bible teaches that if you are a Christian, then "to be absent from the body" is "to be present with the

Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). Our Shorter Catechism says, “The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.” (Answer to Question 37). The Church of England, at the time of the Protestant Reformation, drew up Thirty-Nine Articles of Belief, similar to our own Westminster Confession of Faith. Article 22, amongst other things, says this: “The Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory... and also invocation of Saints, is a foolish thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.” So, we are not to pray to the saints and we are not to pray for the saints.

The Collect in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer for All Saints Day says this, “Oh Almighty God... grant us grace so to follow Thy Blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys, which Thou hast prepared for those who unfeignedly love Thee.” That’s the appropriate prayer -- that God would inspire us by the example of those noble Christians who have gone before us, to live a virtuous and godly life.

So what about Halloween? I would like to propose an alternative to the way we have come to observe it. I don’t think you can simply take it away from children without putting something in its place. How about an “All Saints Party”? Why not a party on the night of Halloween that still provides an evening of fun and celebration for the children as well as adults, but transforms that fun into something distinctly Christian?

Oh, there can be fine costumes for the party! How about trying to dress as we imagine the saints of old did -- Joan of Arc or Francis of Assisi, or our own Jonathan Edwards or Dr. John Witherspoon, the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence; or your favorite Bible characters -- Abraham or Moses, or David the shepherd boy; or the Apostle John or St. Paul? And each person can tell the story of the saint whom his costume represents.

Or, here’s something very important: we can make this party the opportunity to remind the children that every true Christian is a saint. And that means that if you had a grandparent or an old friend who were fine Christians, and they died, you would remember them and rejoice that they are now in heaven with Jesus.

I have found that children love to ask questions and talk about heaven. You remember Wordsworth’s famous line:

“Heaven lies about us in our infancy!”

Or perhaps you, as a parent, have lost your father or mother; and you can tell the children about the wonderful people they were, and some of the lovely things you remember about them.

We can remind children of how glorious a thing it is to be a Christian, because we know that some day we will see our Savior face to face in heaven and be with Him and with all the saints forever, especially those whom we have loved and known here on earth.

And what if one girl or boy at the party would say, “This past year Helen, one of my best friends, was killed in a car accident. She was a true Christian, and I miss her very much.” What

an opportunity for you to say, “Yes, we’re all close to the next world. That’s why it’s so important for each one of us to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and live for Him. He conquered all the powers of evil -- ghosts and goblins can never harm us now – and He promises to take us to heaven when life is ended here on earth if we trust and love Him.”

What a glorious evangelizing opportunity a Halloween party could be -- and with cake and pumpkin pie and all kinds of good things to eat, and maybe a few songs and hymns thrown in!

Whatever we do, let’s not have any ghosts, witches or monsters. Let’s leave that to the Prince of Darkness. We must focus on light. And personally, I want nothing whatever to do with the whole business of trick or treat, with its Satanic background. I would like to see Christians steadfastly refuse to participate in it altogether. The same thing applies to Jeanne Dixon and horoscopes and Ouija boards and the New Age movement -- all these things are satanically inspired; Christians shouldn’t dabble in them, because if you do, you may get badly burned.

The early Israelites were warned that “When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there... Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord... You must be blameless before the Lord your God.”

Surely that applies to us as well.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7).

**AMEN.**