

REFORMATION DAY – OCTOBER 31

Every year towards the end of October, Christians begin to debate whether or not it is ok to "celebrate" Halloween. Ultimately, each Christian family will have to make its own decision based on a variety of factors and "let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5). However, it is helpful to know where Halloween comes from and how it has been viewed by Christians in ages past. Obviously, our secularized culture has corrupted it. Today, we live in a society much like that feared by C. S. Lewis -- a time when people have become materialists who do not really believe in God any longer but who, strangely, do still believe in demons. So it's no surprise that a lot of things associated with Halloween in popular culture are unacceptable to Christians. Some treat it as "Satan's day" and "celebrate" everything evil and violent. But that's not to say we can't "take back" Halloween for Christ, provided we understand its origins and historic meaning.

Anyway, here are some things about Halloween, Reformation Day, and All Saints Day that you may find interesting:

October 31, Hallowed Eve (popularly know by its contraction, 'Halloween'), is the night before All Saints Day (or All 'Hallowed Ones' Day). Traditionally, it became an evening when Christians dressed up like the devil in ridiculous red outfits (complete with pitchforks) in order to mock him. They gloriously celebrated the victory of the saints over Satan and death in Christ -- a victory shared by both saints on earth (the "church militant") and in heaven (the "church triumphant"). Such celebrations were powerful reminders that Christ had exorcised the old world and ushered in his kingdom, a reign of righteousness and life (Jn. 12:31; Rom. 5:12-21; Heb. 2:14-15). The fourth century theologian Athanasius gives a good example of the early church's attitude towards death:

Death has become like a tyrant who has been completely conquered by the legitimate monarch; bound hand and foot the passers-by jeer at him, hitting him and abusing him, no longer afraid of his cruelty and rage, because of the king who has conquered him. So has death been conquered and branded for what it is by the Saviour on the cross. It is bound hand and foot, all who are in Christ trample it as they pass and as witnesses to Him deride it, scoffing and saying, "O Death, where is thy victory? O Grave, where is thy sting?" (1 Cor. 15: 55)

Another church father Tertullian, talked about how the ancient Christian martyrs, women and children included, taunted death as a defeated foe, even as they were taken to stake or thrown to the lions. They were fearless because Christ had already vanquished death on their behalf. The early church preacher Chrysostom said Christians should not wail their dead too much at funerals because the hope of the resurrection overshadows the reality of death. Augustine described the cross of Christ as a mousetrap which God sprung on Satan at the perfect moment. Just when Satan thought he was entering his greatest triumph, God had his finest hour, as Satan took the bait and brought about his own downfall (cf. 2 Cor. 2:7-8). In the cross, Christ had humiliated the demonic principalities and powers, and now Christians could do the same (cf. Col. 2:14-15). It was this confidence in the face of Satan and death that made a celebration like Hallowed Eve make sense. No other ancient religion or philosophy had an answer for death; at best they could try to come to terms with the inevitability of death and passively resign themselves to its power. Only the gospel actually gave people hope that death could be defeated and reversed. Only the gospel promised people glory at death and even more glorious resurrection life at the end of history.

This playful, even humorous, sense of triumph over death animated medieval Christendom in all kinds of ways. For example, Christians were free to take on risky mission projects because they knew their lives were secure in Christ. They could laugh in the face of death because The One enthroned in heaven laughs at the futility of his enemies (Ps. 2). Thus, in the fourth century Patrick risked life and limb in returning to Ireland to preach the gospel. As an escaped slave, he could have been put to death by his former captors. Instead, he became an instrument of life to

thousands and almost single-handedly Christianized a whole nation. Boniface, the "apostle to the Germans," fearlessly chopped down Thor's sacred oak (and used the wood to make a chapel!) because he knew Thor had been defeated and possessed no power. This victory of the demonic even made its way into Christian architecture. For example, gargoyles on medieval church buildings were not carved into stone in a superstitious attempt to keep away evil spirits (at least not at first). Rather, they were playful, ornamental (and often functional -- as rain gutters!) mockery of Satan and other demonic figures, who had been cast out of God's presence through Christ's victory on the cross (cf. Rev. 12).

The observance of Hallowed Eve/All Saints on Oct. 31/Nov. 1 dates back to at least the 700s AD; some scholars claim the celebrations can be traced back to the 300s in some form or fashion, which is quite likely. So from quite early on in her history, the church had a annual commemoration of the saints' triumph over evil and death in Christ. There had been no comparative celebration in paganism because no pagan worldview could give such a hope -- a hope stronger than death, a hope that overcomes and conquers death.

To be sure, Christian practices on Halloween were also mixed in with leftover remnants from pagan harvest celebrations (mostly from the Celts), but that's not any different from Christmas, Easter, etc. Even our names for the days of the week and months of the year derive from ancient pagan religions. But because those gods (sometimes called the "principalities and powers" in the NT) are dead (theologically, and now culturally), the traditions connected with them can no longer be regarded as pagan. They make no difference to us. For example, calling a day of the week "Thursday" is hardly paying homage to Thor, the ancient god of thunder, from which the name of the day derives. Generally speaking, believers sought to Christianize what they could in their culture, while discarding those things that were clearly inconsistent with the Christian faith. Sometimes that was a messy business, as maturity is never attained instantaneously. Some customs were problematic, while others were relatively innocent. The customs that were preserved eventually gained new associations, void of pagan meaning. The gospel transformed and reclaimed the symbols of the pagan religions.

It is hard for us to imagine today, but in the ancient pagan cultures, the whole world was "haunted." Demons and other forces were lurking behind every bush and tree. The world was a scary place. The spirits of dead ancestors demanded homage in most religions, and prevented societies from ever moving forward. Moreover, fear of death held men in bondage. Death could not be defeated or avoided. With this in view, you can begin to get a sense of the joy that newly disciplined cultures felt when they learned that Christ had defeated all the gods and demons of the pagan world, including the enemy of death itself. They were glad to learn that creation is God's good handiwork (1 Tim. 4:1-5), and is now ruled by Christ, rather than the nature gods. This good news was certainly something to celebrate in a variety of ways, and so the Christians did! The gospel demystified the world and put death in its place. Through Christ, the world had been exorcised once and for all. To be sure, Satan still attacks and tempts God's people, seeking to devour them (1 Pt. 5:8). But these are the last thrashings of an already defeated foe, like a beheaded snake's final writhing; Satan's doom is already assured through the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 16:20). Now that Christ has won the victory, the church is engaged in a mopping up operation. In the cosmic war of history, D-Day has already happened nearly two thousand years ago at the cross; thus, our coming V-Day is absolutely guaranteed.

You may remember me mentioning a while back that the church calendar has two "cycles" -- a dominical cycle that follows the life and ministry of our Lord and an ecclesiastical cycle that commemorates the history of the church. The dominical cycle runs for about 6 months from Advent/Christmas, through Lent/Easter, and culminates with Ascension and Pentecost. It covers roughly December to June. It is foundational, following the contours of the gospel narratives. The ecclesiastical cycle includes special days rooted in church history, building upon and flowing out of the dominical cycle (e.g., prominent saint's days, like St. Patrick's Day; Reformation Day; etc.). The ecclesiastical cycle especially fills in "ordinary time" the other 6 months of the year (though it

also overlaps the dominical cycle). Obviously, All Saints Eve/All Saints Day make no sense apart from Good Friday and Easter; because Christ has passed through death and come out the other side in resurrection life, we can celebrate the church's victory over death as well. All Saints must never be separated from its foundation in the gospel. The story of the church rests upon the story of Jesus.

Halloween as we know it today, of course, has been sadly detached from its Christian heritage (including All Saints Day) -- and we should do all we can to win it back. That's not to say we should observe the day just as the world does, and many contemporary, worldly Halloween customs clearly violate the Christian faith. Whether or not you dress your kids up and take them out in the neighborhood to get candy is a matter of Christian liberty and should be determined in the same way as any other decision about adiaphora ("things indifferent"), guided by prudence and charity. But this is not a day we should be scared of. We should not hesitate to use it to teach our children about both church history and Christian theology. In this way, Halloween helps us enculturate our children in the Christian story and form of life.

Probably the best Halloween article I have found is this one by Jim Jordan:
<http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/open-book/no-28-concerning-halloween/>

What about Reformation Day?

Providentially, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses up on the door of the castle church in Wittenburg on Hallowed Eve, October 31, 1517. Luther was quite deliberate in choosing this day because he knew in nailing up the theses he was taking up a new Spiritual battle against the theological and moral compromises which had corrupted the late medieval church. This is the event that most historians recognize as the beginning of the Reformation. As heirs of the the Reformed movement from the 16th century, we have a second reason to celebrate on the day of October 31: We give God thanks for his work of renewal in the church through Luther, John Calvin, Martin Bucer, John Knox, and others, and we pray that he would grant us yet another reformation in our time. We should be sure to teach our children both layers of meaning associated with the last day of October. (If you don't, the world will teach them the day means something else!) Reformation is a wonderful time to teach your children about sixteenth and seventeenth century heroes of the faith who planted themselves firmly on God's Word and said, "Here I stand! I can do no other!"

All Saints Day is traditionally November 1. The day has a variety of claimed origins and uses. It is sort of a Christian "memorial day" to remember the Christians of ages gone by. There is some dispute as to how the day got started as a Christian celebration. Some say it was a day for all those saints who were not prominent enough to have their own "saint day." As the number of famous martyrs began to exceed the number of days in the calendar year, the church needed a day that would celebrate a lot of saints at once. Hence, a day for *all* the saints.

All Saints Day and Reformation Day are not at odds with one another. Some may think they're contradictory -- All Saints is for "catholic" Christians, whereas as Reformation Day remembers a sectarian event for Protestants. But that's not the case at all. As Phillip Schaff put it, the Reformation is the greatest act of the *catholic* church in her history thus far. The Reformers were "reformed catholics" -- they sought to reform the existing church, not start a new church from scratch. Reformation Day is not the ecclesiastical equivalent of Independence Day. The Reformers themselves were deeply grounded in the tradition of the church and desired the unity of the church. Their greatest fear was that their heirs would continue to divide and splinter from one another. Martin Bucer summarizes the attitude of the early Reformers quite nicely:

Those who call upon our Lord Jesus Christ in truth, whatever their outward customs and identity may be, we wish to acknowledge and love as our members in Christ the Lord.

And they will also treat us in the same way, irrespective of the fact that we may not share the same ceremonies and church practices. For the fellowship of the Christian church consists not in ceremonies and outward practices, but in true faith, in obedience to the pure gospel, and in the right use of the sacraments as the Lord has ordained them. Everything else each church has to arrange as it finds best for itself. In any case this is something which the old holy fathers recognized and maintained.

Thus, the Reformation must be understood as taking place within the context of the catholic church. The Reformers stood up against morally and theologically corrupt leaders within the church in order to recall the one, holy, catholic apostolic church back to her roots in the gospel. Our celebration of the Reformation is a way of remembering God's faithfulness to his church at a particularly important juncture in her history. God raised up several generations of men and women who were willing to sacrifice everything in order to be faithful to the Word. Furthermore, the Protestant Reformation served the good of the catholic church as a whole, even if many Christians then and now have refused to join the Reformation movement. The Reformers did not depart from the catholic church; rather they believed the church of Rome had largely departed from the catholic faith. They did what they did not for their own gain or benefit, but so that the church as a whole might be led into greater faithfulness, to the glory of God.

Sadly, Protestant churches have not held true to the catholic vision of the original Reformers. Thus, it is entirely proper that our Reformation Day celebrations be tinged with a strain of lament. We have made the worst nightmares of Luther and Calvin come true. We have betrayed their cause and ruined Protestantism's hope of providing a unified alternative to Roman Catholicism. So while the Reformation should be remembered as a special time of renewal and revival in the church, we should also see it as time for repenting as best we can of our ungodly divisions over the last several centuries. We need to pray that God would stitch the torn fabric of the church back together.

I need to say a few more words about how we should understand "All Saints Day" in light of the Bible and the Reformation. As *Protesting Catholics* (as opposed to *Roman Catholics*), we believe that *all* Christians are saints, not just martyrs, or pastors, or exceptionally faithful believers. The word "saint" is related to the word "sanctification" and means "holy person." Specifically, it describes a person who may draw near to God, that is, a person who may minister as a priest in God's presence. Just as the Reformers recovered the biblical notion of the "priesthood of all believers," so we can say they recovered the "sainthood of all believers." Indeed, this is part of the theological and liturgical revolution brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the old covenant, a subclass of the covenant community served as priests and ministered in the house of God on behalf of the rest. In the new covenant, the veil has been torn, the heavenly sanctuary opened, and we all have been granted access in Christ to the throne of grace (Heb. 4, 10). We are all saints, priests, and holy ones, and so Paul address the church as such (e.g., Eph. 1).

All Saints Day is a time not only to remember this great privilege we have as saints in The Saint, Jesus Christ. It is also a time of remembering all the saints who have gone before us, who passed the faith along from one generation to the next. It is a day to remember and celebrate the history of the church. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, who have already run their course and finished their race. They are testimonies to God's faithfulness. All Saints Day is a time to give thanks for these models of faith, recorded in church history books and in our own family trees. We are called to stand on their shoulders and build on their work. This is a time to remember that the church militant and the church triumphant is one church; it is a time to remember that in worship, we join together with "the spirits of just men made perfect" (Heb. 12) and "all the company of heaven" in giving praise to God.

In order to liturgically fit both Reformation Day and All Saints Day into the church calendar, we observe Reformation Day as a church on the last Sunday in October, and All Saints Day on the

first Sunday in November. I try to make it my custom to use these two Sundays of the year to preach lessons from church history or biblical themes related to the church life.