

A SHORT BOOK FOR CURIOUS CHRIS-
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Reclaiming Halloween



BY BRIDIGET ANDERSON

*The Christian story of All Hallows' Eve — and
why believers can celebrate October 31st with
a clear conscience*

*“The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

JOHN 1:5

Reclaiming Halloween: The Christian Story of All Hallows' Eve

Written to help Christians understand the true history of October 31st — and to celebrate it with joy rather than fear.

Scripture quotations are from the everyday language of the author's paraphrase unless otherwise noted. Historical claims in this book are drawn from widely available scholarly and encyclopedic sources, listed at the back.

Feel free to share this book with your church, small group, or family.

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October.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Question Every October



Every October, millions of Christians feel a quiet tug-of-war. The porch is decorated, the kids are begging for costumes, the neighbors are handing out candy — and somewhere in the back of the mind a voice asks: *should we really be doing this?*

Maybe you grew up hearing that Halloween is the devil’s holiday. Maybe your church hosts a “harvest festival” on October 31st as a safe alternative, with an unspoken understanding that the real thing is off-limits. Maybe you’ve simply absorbed the cultural message that Halloween belongs to witches, ghosts, and horror movies — and that a faithful Christian keeps a polite distance.

This short book exists to tell you something you may never have heard from a pulpit: **Halloween was never the enemy’s holiday. It was the Church’s.**

The name itself gives it away. “Halloween” is a contraction of *All Hallows’ Eve* — the evening before All

Saints' Day, one of the oldest and most joyful feasts on the Christian calendar. For well over a thousand years, Christians have marked October 31st not with dread, but with vigil prayers, candlelight, charity to the poor, and celebration of the saints who went before us.

That doesn't mean every Halloween custom is wholesome, or that discernment goes out the window on October 31st. It means the *day itself* was never meant for evil. It was meant for light.

This book will walk you through the real history — honestly, including the parts scholars still debate — and show you how Christians can reclaim October 31st with confidence and joy. By the last page, you'll know the story well enough to tell it at your own dinner table.

Let's begin with the name.



CHAPTER ONE

The Name Tells the Story



Say the word slowly: *Hallow-e'en*. It is simply old English for “All Hallows’ Evening” — the evening before All Hallows’ Day. And “hallow” means *holy*. You pray it every time you say the Lord’s Prayer: “*Hallowed* be thy name.”

So the word “Halloween” literally means “**the holy evening**” — the holy evening before the Feast of All Saints. There is no darkness hidden in the name. There never was.

This follows one of the oldest patterns in Christian worship. From the earliest centuries, the Church has begun its great feasts the night before: Christmas has Christmas Eve, Easter has the Easter Vigil, and All Saints’ Day has All Hallows’ Eve. In the ancient Jewish reckoning that shaped Christian practice, the day begins at sundown — so the vigil *is* the start of the feast, a night of preparation through prayer and fasting before the morning’s celebration.

“Halloween” comes from “All Hallows’ Eve” — the evening before the Christian holy days of All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day.

— Encyclopaedia Britannica

When Christians gathered on the evening of October 31st in centuries past, they weren’t dabbling in darkness. They were doing what Christians have always done on the eve of a great feast: lighting candles, ringing bells, praying for the dead, and getting ready to celebrate the saints in glory. The church service for the night is still called the *Vigil of All Hallows* — or the *Vigil of All Saints*.

Hold onto that thought, because everything else in this book flows from it. The costumes, the candy, the carved pumpkins, the talk of spirits — every one of those customs grew up around a Christian feast. Some grew in the sunlight of the Church’s teaching; a few grew a little wild at the edges. But the root is holy.



CHAPTER TWO

Allhallowtide: Three Holy Days



Halloween was never a standalone event. It is the front door of a three-day festival the Church calls *Allhallowtide* — a little season of light that runs from the evening of October 31st through November 2nd.

October 31st — All Hallows' Eve

The vigil. Traditionally a time of prayer and fasting in preparation for the feast, followed by “suitable festivities and entertainments” after the service, and visits to the churchyard where flowers and candles were placed on graves.

November 1st — All Saints' Day (All Hallows' Day)

The feast itself: a day to honor *all* the saints and martyrs — the famous ones with their own feast days, and the

countless unknown faithful who have no day of their own. For Roman Catholics it remains a holy day of obligation; for Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, and many other Protestants it is one of the principal feasts of the church year. The liturgical color is white — the color of victory and life.

November 2nd — All Souls' Day

A day devoted to praying for all the faithful departed. Added to the calendar around the year 998, it completes the triduum: the Church Militant (us), the Church Triumphant (the saints), and the Church Expectant (the departed) — all remembered together.

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

At the heart of Allhallowtide is one of Christianity's most beautiful doctrines: that the living and the dead in Christ are still one family. Death does not end the communion — it completes it. That is why remembering the departed with candles, prayers, and flowers was never morbid. It was love, refusing to let go.

Notice what this three-day rhythm does to the modern debate. The question isn't really "is Halloween Christian?" The question is whether we remember that Octo-

ber 31st is *part of something larger* — the doorway into three days of honoring saints, remembering loved ones, and proclaiming that death does not win.



CHAPTER THREE

How All Saints' Day Began



The Feast of All Saints is far older than most Christians realize — and its origin story is pure Church history, with no shadows in it at all.

It began with the martyrs. After the persecutions of the Roman Empire, the Church faced a happy problem: there were more martyrs than there were days in the year. So a single day was set apart to honor them *all* at once. In the early centuries, various churches kept this commemoration on different dates, mostly in the spring. In Rome, the feast was kept on May 13th — the anniversary of Pope Boniface IV's rededication of the Pantheon in the year 609 as a church honoring "St. Mary and all martyrs."

Then, in the 8th century, Pope Gregory III moved the feast to **November 1st**. A century later, Pope Gregory IV extended the observance to the whole Church, and around 998 the feast of All Souls (November 2nd) was added. The three-day festival was complete — more than a thousand years ago.

After the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, “there were more martyrs than there were days in the year, and so one day was set apart in honor of them all, and called All Saints’ Day.”

Why did Gregory III choose November 1st? Historians debate the motives. November was harvest season in northern Europe, when communities naturally gathered — a practical time for a great feast. Some scholars suggest the date was chosen to give Christian meaning to the season’s existing autumn festivals, redirecting people’s attention from old superstitions to the saints in glory.

And that brings us to the objection you’ve probably heard — the one about pagans. It deserves an honest answer, and it gets a full chapter next.



CHAPTER FOUR

What About Samhain?



Let's deal honestly with the elephant in the room. You've probably heard it said: "Halloween is really the pagan Celtic festival of Samhain — the Church just painted a Christian face on it." Is that true?

The short answer: **it's more complicated than the memes suggest — and it doesn't change the conclusion.**

Samhain was indeed a real Celtic festival marking the end of the harvest and the start of winter, when the Celts believed the boundary between the living and the dead grew thin. Bonfires were lit; the old year died and the new one began. That much is history.

But here's what careful scholars actually say about the connection — and there are two respectable views:

View one: the Church deliberately placed All Saints' Day on November 1st to Christianize the season, absorbing and redirecting existing autumn customs. This fits a

well-documented missionary strategy. Around the year 600, Pope Gregory the Great advised missionaries in England *not* to destroy the people's customs outright, but to convert them to Christian purposes — even rededicating pagan temples as churches. If the Church did something similar with the autumn festivals, it was an act of redemption, not compromise.

View two: other historians argue the Christian observance arose independently — that November 1st was chosen for practical reasons (harvest-time gatherings in northern Europe) and that the supposed pagan takeover is overstated. In this telling, the similarities are mostly coincidence and shared human nature: every culture on earth has autumn festivals about death and harvest, because every culture watches the leaves fall.

According to some scholars, the Christian Church absorbed Celtic practices associated with Samhain and Christianized the celebration; other scholars maintain that the Christian observance arose completely independent of Samhain.

— Summarizing the scholarly debate

Here's why the debate, interesting as it is, shouldn't trouble a Christian conscience. **The content of Halloween is Christian regardless.** Honoring martyrs, praying for the departed, giving alms to the poor, lighting candles against the darkness — none of that is pagan. Those are the actual practices of Allhallowtide, and they were the practices for a thousand years before anyone in America carved a pumpkin.

And consider the logic of the “pagan origins” objection itself. If a date's ancient associations disqualify it forever, then Christians must also surrender Christmas (which shares its season with the Roman Saturnalia) and Easter (whose very English name is debated) — not to mention wedding rings, the names of the weekdays, and just about every folk custom on earth. The Church has never believed that a calendar date can be permanently owned by darkness. It has always believed the opposite: that *Christ claims every season*.

The old festivals weren't defeated by being ignored. They were defeated by being *outshone* — replaced with something truer, brighter, and better. That is exactly what Allhallowtide did.



CHAPTER FIVE

Costumes, Candy, and Carved Pumpkins



What about the *stuff* of Halloween — the costumes, the door-to-door candy, the glowing pumpkins? Surely those can't be Christian. Actually, almost all of them can be traced to medieval Christian practice. Let's take them one by one.

Trick-or-Treating: It Started with Prayers

In medieval England and Ireland, the poor would go “*souling*” on Hallowmas — going door to door offering to pray for the household's departed loved ones, in exchange for small round pastries called *soul cakes*. Each cake earned meant another prayer said for a soul. Children took up the custom, singing rhymes like “*A soul cake, a soul cake, have mercy on all Christian souls, for a soul cake!*”

Read that again: the ancestor of trick-or-treating was **an act of charity and intercession** — feeding the poor

in exchange for prayers for the dead. When Irish and Scottish immigrants brought the custom to America in the 1800s, the prayers gradually dropped away and the candy stayed. The shell remained; the soul of it was forgotten. But the root was holy.

Costumes: Disguises with a History

In Scotland and Ireland, young people practiced *guising* — dressing in costume and performing a song, poem, or joke in exchange for treats. Medieval Christians also believed the “veil” between this world and the next grew thin during Allhallowtide, and some wore masks and disguises on the Eve. There was even a tradition — still alive in Catholic parishes today — of children dressing up *as saints* for All Saints’ Day and telling the saint’s story. Costumes, at their best, were never about glorifying evil. They were play, pageantry, and disguise on a holy eve.

Jack-o’-Lanterns: Lanterns Against the Dark

Long before pumpkins, the Irish and Scots hollowed out turnips, carved faces into them, and set candles inside — lanterns in windows and on gateposts during the dark nights of Allhallowtide. When immigrants reached America, they found pumpkins: bigger, softer, and far

easier to carve. The New World vegetable replaced the Old World turnip, and the jack-o'-lantern was born.

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

There is something deeply fitting about a carved lantern glowing on a Christian doorstep on All Hallows' Eve. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). A jack-o'-lantern was never a tribute to the dark — it was a small defiance of it.

None of this means every modern Halloween custom is edifying — we'll talk about discernment in Chapter 7. But the next time someone tells you the costumes and candy are pagan, you'll know the real story: they're the faded echoes of medieval Christian charity, pageantry, and light.



CHAPTER SIX

When Did Halloween Get Scary?



If Halloween began as a Christian feast of light, how did it get its dark reputation? The answer is a story of loss — not of corruption at the start, but of *abandonment* along the way.

Act one: the Reformation. When Protestant reformers rejected the doctrines of purgatory and prayers for the dead, they also suppressed the feasts built around them — including Allhallowtide. In much of the Protestant world, All Saints’ Day, All Souls’ Day, and their vigil simply vanished from the calendar. But here’s the irony: the *feast* disappeared while the *folk customs* — bonfires, costumes, door-to-door visiting — lived on. A holiday was cut loose from the holy days that gave it meaning, and left to drift.

Act two: America. Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine in the 1800s brought Halloween customs to the United States, where they merged into a com-

munity-centered, increasingly commercial celebration. By the mid-20th century, Halloween was about costumes, candy, and neighborhood fun — harmless, but hollowed out, with almost no one remembering the saints.

Act three: Hollywood. Beginning with films like *Halloween* (1978) and a whole industry of horror movies, haunted houses, and shock marketing, popular culture dressed the holiday in gore and occult imagery. This was not ancient paganism returning — it was modern entertainment, selling thrills.

Act four: the backlash. In the 1970s and 80s, many evangelical churches — looking at the horror-movie version of Halloween and knowing nothing of its history — concluded the whole thing must be satanic. “Hell houses,” boycotts, and alternative “harvest festivals” followed. The intentions were protective and sincere. But the history was wrong.

Christians didn't lose Halloween to the darkness. They walked away from it — and then blamed the dark for moving in.

See the pattern? At no point did the Church's feast *become* evil. Instead, the feast was forgotten, the customs were secularized, and then the secularized shell was judged as if it were the whole story. The tragedy isn't that Halloween was stolen from Christians. It's that Christians *gave it away* — and many have been afraid of their own holiday ever since.

The good news: what was given away can be taken back.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Celebrating as a Christian Today



So how should a Christian actually *do* October 31st? Not with fear, and not with blind cultural conformity either — but with the confidence of someone who knows whose day it really is. Here are seven ways to reclaim it.

1. Keep the Vigil

Start where the Church always started: with prayer. Some churches now hold a *Night of Light* service on All Hallows' Eve — candles, Scripture, and worship to open the feast. Even a simple family prayer time on the evening of the 31st reconnects the night to its purpose.

2. Dress as the Saints

Revive the old Catholic custom: have the kids dress as saints, heroes of the faith, or biblical figures — and let

each one tell their saint's story. It's the same fun as costumes, aimed at glory instead of gore.

3. Remember Your Dead

Visit a cemetery. Light a candle. Tell stories about grandparents and godparents who are with the Lord. Allhallowtide was built for this — grief and hope, held together.

4. Be the Best House on the Block

Hospitality is a Christian superpower. Give out the good candy. Decorate with light instead of horror. Let your porch be the one kids remember warmly — a small parable of generosity on a night the culture expects fear.

5. Practice the Old Charity

Remember *souling*? Bake something — soul cakes, cookies, anything — and take it to a neighbor, a widow, or a shelter. Tie the giving to prayer for others, and you've rebuilt the medieval custom from the inside out.

6. Tell the Story

Most Christians who fear Halloween have simply never heard this history. Tell it — at the dinner table, in small

group, from the pulpit. Truth is the best disinfectant for fear.

7. Exercise Discernment, Not Dread

A clear conscience doesn't mean an unthinking one. Christians can reasonably choose to skip the gory, the occult-glamorizing, and the cruel — not because the *date* is evil, but because some *content* is unworthy of the day. That's Romans 14 territory: let each be convinced in their own mind, and let love — not fear — lead.

THE PRINCIPLE

Reclaim, don't retreat. The Church's historic instinct was never to surrender a season to darkness, but to fill it with light until the darkness had nowhere left to stand.



CONCLUSION

Take Back the Night



Here is the whole book in one sentence: **October 31st was the Church's night before anyone else claimed it, and it still is.**

The name is Christian. The feast is Christian. The customs — the prayers for the dead, the charity to the poor, the candles in the windows, the dressing up on the holy eve — grew in Christian soil. What the world did with the holiday afterward doesn't change what it was made to be, any more than a vandalized church stops being a church.

For too long, too many believers have approached Halloween the way you'd approach a haunted house: braced, suspicious, ready to flee. But you don't flee your own home. You turn on the lights.

So this October 31st, do something subversive: celebrate like a Christian who knows the history. Light a candle. Say a prayer for those who went before. Give generously to whoever knocks. Tell a child that the

saints are cheering them on. And when the sun goes down, remember that the darkness only looks powerful until the light shows up.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

— John 1:5

Happy Halloween.



Sources & Further Reading

The historical claims in this book are drawn from widely available scholarly and encyclopedic sources. A curious reader can verify every major claim below.

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