

WHEN HALLOWEEN BECOMES A STUMBLING BLOCK

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

October 31, 2021

Today is Halloween – and it’s always a difficult time for Christians, especially those with young children, who want to dress up and go out with their friends. So, do you let your kids go out trick-or-treating, or not – well maybe, if they don’t wear anything frightening or demonic? Then, there’s the question, as a church, do you put on some type of alternative party so that the kids can still have fun in a safe environment. It’s never an easy decision on what to do about Halloween for us as believers!

There also seems to be a great deal more people interested in celebrating Halloween now than in the past, and some go all out in decorating – it almost seems to be like Christmas at some homes. Today in the stores, you not only see costumes for children, but just as many or even more costumes for adults. So, as Christians, how do we deal with Halloween, especially when it lands on a Sunday? I have come up with four options and there are probably others:

1. Halloween is harmless fun – what’s the big deal anyway, the kids enjoy decorating and dressing up, going out trick-or-treating with their friends and getting candy. So, go all out for Halloween!
2. Ignore Halloween – don’t decorate and don’t participate in trick-or-treating, turn off the porch light, don’t answer the door and keep your kids from celebrating by doing some other activity.
3. Take Halloween seriously and speak against it as something that’s potentially dangerous because you are dabbling in the realm of the occult and the demonic.
4. Redeem Halloween by making it positive, another opportunity to share your faith with others, especially the children in your neighbourhood?

To answer those questions, I believe that we have to answer some other questions first. What are we to believe about the spiritual realm, Satan, demons, evil, and spiritual warfare? And whose authority counts most in your life as a believer. I already gave a message on the believer’s authority back on August 15th, and you can check that out on the church website. What I want us think about this morning is this – can how I celebrate Halloween or not celebrate Halloween, become a stumbling block to others?

The Bible speaks a great deal about the existence of a spiritual realm – the Word of God speaks about both good and evil and the existence of angels and demons, making it clear that we need to shun away from the occult, witchcraft, horoscopes, false religions, and anything that is demonic. Also, the Bible tells us that people can be demonized (controlled, influenced and even possessed by demons), and demons can occupy objects, homes, and buildings – even churches. Jesus cast out numerous demons during His ministry here on this earth, and as believers, we know that we have also been given the authority to cast out demons in Christ’s Name. So, we are not to be deceived, misled, or take this subject lightly, because there is a very real spiritual threat with Halloween. There is genuine power in the occult, but its demonic power, which is a defeated power because of the cross.

The problem for many of us here in North America, compared to many third-world countries, is that the demonic is downplayed, ignored, or driven underground, and sometimes even celebrated in horror movies, so Halloween is portrayed as an innocent fun activity. Most in the Western world pretend that the demonic realm doesn’t exist, which is just fine with Satan, he doesn’t mind one bit, he actually prefers working underground, out of sight and below the radar. If anyone has travelled to some of the third-world countries in Africa and South America on a mission trip – you know that it’s real, because it’s very visible, and can have a strong hold on people!

As Christians, God’s Word cautions us to not take the dark spiritual realm lightly – it’s a real and dangerous threat to the advancement of the Gospel, keeping many in bondage and from surrendering their lives to Christ because of fear. While the dark spiritual realm is real and a constant danger, we are not to have a spirit of fear over the demonic realm; instead, we are to confront evil with boldness and confidence, because they are a defeated foe. 1 Peter 5:8 describes the devil as a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour, but he can only roar, he has no teeth, so we can run towards the roar. Satan is described as roaring lion without teeth. And another thing is that we are not to have a fascination over the evil spiritual realm either; instead, we are to have a healthy respect for the powers of spiritual evil and remain always focussed on Christ! While it is true that Satan (**as Isaiah 14 & Revelation 12 state**) has been hurled down to this earth and is the god of this age, and is filled with fury against us Christians because his time is short, we have

the greater power in Christ and can overcome the enemy with the Name of Jesus, with the blood of the Lamb and the power of our testimony!

Demonic activity is also known to peak during certain times of the year – like during the full moon, during the times of the summer and winter solstice, and especially during pagan celebration like Halloween (also known as the witches' New Year). In ancient times, October 31st was the end of summer and the beginning of winter – with November 1st being the New Year for the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon calendars, and the first day of winter. It was marked by festivals marked with animal sacrifices, offerings to the dead, and large bonfires in recognition of departed souls. It was believed that on this night that the veil between the present world and the spiritual world beyond was opened, so that demons, witches, goblins, and ghosts were released to roam about looking for a home, and they went about harassing the living looking for a dwelling place. The ancient Druids, who believed in all of this wild suppression, would dress up in costumes so they wouldn't be recognized by these evil forces; thereby, making themselves immune to their attacks. That's where our modern tradition of Halloween customs originates!

In response to this pagan tradition – the early church in the Middle Ages moved its celebration called All Saint's Day, the day on their calendar when they would celebrate and remember those great Christians of the past, from sometime in May to November 1st, and renamed October 31st, "*All Hallow's Eve*," from which we get the word Halloween. "*Hallow*" means "*holy*," and "*een*" or "*eve*" was added to make that day "*the holy eve*," the sacred evening before All Saints Day. This was an attempt by Christians, to infiltrate this pagan celebration with the truth of the Gospel message. It was a bold evangelistic move to demonstrate that only the power of the resurrected Christ and the Lordship of Jesus Christ could protect men and women from the demonic – negating their superstitious rituals and the wearing of their costumes to keep the demons at bay. So, like the Christians of the past we can take the focus on demons, witches and death and turn it around, telling our children, grandchildren, and neighbours, that although evil, death and the grave are very real, we are more than conquerors over the powers of darkness through our belief in Jesus Christ, who defeated death and the devil on the cross. The church can take a bad day that focuses on a lot of superstition and darkness and turn it into a positive day – bringing light into the darkness!

As Christians we have the freedom to fully participate in Halloween, with all of its gore, zombies and scary things like those living around us, but is that really a wise choice for Christ followers to make? What does the Apostle Paul have to say about that – **Philippians 4:8**, “*Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – think about such things.*” God wants our focus and attention to be centered only on those things which are true, noble, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy. So, if we are out at the store shopping for skeletons, witches, spiderwebs, and tombstones for our porch decorations and getting hideous masks for our children, there’s a problem, because Christians trying to follow the Bible and focus on what is good, praiseworthy, and excellent would be seen as hypocrites. For a Christian it is unwise and makes no sense to our witness to fully participate and celebrate in the gory, the gross, the sickening and the scary things at Halloween according to the Apostle Paul!

Then, what about participating selectively, as many of us do? We take out everything that’s not consistent with the good, the lovely, the pure, the admirable, the praiseworthy, and give out candy to those coming to our door at our porch that is not decorated with scary spiderwebs, witches and goblins. We dress up our kids in costumes that are not gross or scary, but as a princess or a fireman and have them go out to safe areas of town with friends we know and parents we trust or go with them ourselves. We can take out all the negative and keep all the positive aspects of the holiday to make it a fun time for the kids, without looking to our neighbours as judgmental, or critical, or holier-than-thou fanatics!

Tuning to our Scripture this morning from **1 Corinthians 8**, let’s see what Paul has to say about living in a secular culture and not damaging our witness or becoming a stumbling block to others. The problems we are currently facing in our culture today is not that different than what the early Christians had to deal with back 2000 years ago. In these verses Paul is dealing with a situation that would be foreign to us today, “*eating meat sacrificed to idols;*” however, we can apply the same principals to anything that we deal with in our secular society today that cause controversy. So, these verses can be applied to Halloween, COVID protocols, or any other controversy we may be dealing with.

We have to remember here that these Corinthian Christians not only lived in a highly secular and pagan society, but they all came out of this background when they became believers. So they would have a great deal of pressure to revert back

to their former ways, plus there would also be confusion in what was permissible and what to avoid, as they worked out their faith! Paul was addressing an issue in this church because these new believers were surrounded by idols and idol worship and there were numerous temples, place of idol worship to gods, all throughout their city. People were bringing animals to these temples to be sacrificed to these idols, and the officiating priests would take their portion and then the rest would either be taken home or be sold in the market. Back before modern day refrigeration, meat would spoil very quickly, so it had to be eaten within a few days. So these Christians would have constant exposure to meat sacrificed to idols!

The Corinthian Christians were confronted with the fact that when people came and sacrificed animals to their god, there was leftover meat, and it could end up anywhere. No one wants to waste left over meat, so these temples were also money making operations, selling the meat to various buyers. Some Christians were going around saying, *“I can be a good steward of everything God created and just go ahead and eat that meat, because this idol means nothing to me.”* But, other Christians were saying, *“How dare you eat that meat? That meat was sacrificed in a temple, and those are false gods and Satan is behind all of that, and you are allowing demons to enter your body.”* This was the thought by some because they believed that when meat was sacrificed to an idol demons would enter that meat and if you ate that meat, a demon could enter your body. They believed the sacrificed meat would come alive with demons, all because they noticed when meat was left out for a period of time it would start moving with life. We know today this is because flies would lay their eggs in the meat and maggots would start consuming the meat, but that was foreign to them. So, there was this division between believers that caused disunity and they appealed to Paul to address this issue. And that’s the background to 1 Corinthians 8!

Paul includes this issue in his letter to settle the matter and deal with their concerns! Paul begins in **verse 1** by saying that this is a knowledge issue, some believe one thing and others believe something else, and like every controversial issue everyone thinks their opinion is right. But then Paul asks them, *“Where is love in your understanding?”* Telling them that knowledge without love only puffs up a person with pride and arrogance, and that doesn’t help the situation, because if anyone thinks of himself as a know-it-all they are closed to hearing anyone else’s opinion, then they are a stumbling block and have a lot to learn.

Then Paul reminds them in **verse 4**, ***“We know that ‘An idol is nothing at all in the world’ and that, ‘there is no God but one.”*** Paul reminds them that while there may be a great many so called gods in this world, you came out of that pagan belief, you left that life behind when you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, and you have been set free from all those superstitious beliefs and practices. Making this declaration in **verse 6**, ***“Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.”*** However, the issue in this church was that not all of the believers have come to this understanding, for some their conscience is still weak, they haven’t matured in the faith to understand fully the freedom that they have received in Christ Jesus. Some are still holding on to their past pagan beliefs!

Not everyone in that church fellowship were convinced that the meat sacrificed to idols was not defiled in anyway – **verse 7**, ***“Not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificed food, they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.”*** YES, it’s just as piece of meat, just like that hideous rubber mask that a kid would wear to your door when they come trick-or-treating. IT’S NOTHING! No demon is going to jump out of that meat, but for some believers it’s a real concern, they believe the meat is defiled. And with that person we run the risk of offending them when it’s our meat we’re serving to them as our guest in our home, or eating that meat in front of them at a banquet we are attending, or when it’s our child that is wearing that hideous rubber mask coming to their door?

Even though we have the freedom and every right to do what we are doing, if another less mature Christian sees that, they may have a problem with what we are doing according to **verse 9-11**, ***“Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For is someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.”***

In other words, that person is going to be led astray, because they will be confused in what is right behaviour or wrong behaviour for them as a believer. For example, if I told you that I drink wine from time to time, most of you would say, ***“We can do that, it’s no big deal, Jesus drank wine. The Bible just says don’t get drunk!”***

However, if I came to Bible Study every Thursday night with wine in my travel mug, you may be wondering about your pastor, or you may all start bringing wine to our Thursday night Bible study thinking if it's OK for the pastor it's OK for me. The problem is not the wine, the problem is the association of alcohol for some to those things that are not lovely, or noble, or admirable, or right. In that case, to not offend a brother or sister in Christ, it would be better if I never drank wine, not even a glass at dinner, because I don't want to be part of putting a stumbling block in anyone's path, especially as a pastor. Do I have the freedom to have a glass of wine from time to time? Yes, definitely! But not everything is beneficial for me to do if it puts a stumbling block out there for someone to trip over. To put it in perspective and solidify his point, Paul gives this warning in **verse 12**, "*When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.*" God takes this matter very seriously!

To summarize his teaching in this chapter on meat sacrificed to idols, Paul tells them that he is following the **Principle of Accommodation**, according to **1 Corinthians 8:13**, "*Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so I will not cause them to fall.*" This principle of accommodation is what every believer is called to follow, so as not to become a stumbling block to others, especially new and weaker believers.

Whenever we stay at a motel, the staff's primary role is to make sure that all of our needs are met and that our accommodations make us feel at home and comfortable. They want their customers to be completely satisfied, and that's why they ask us when we check out, "*Were your accommodations satisfactory during your stay with us?*" According to Paul, that's the same role that we are to have as we interact with other believers – don't hurt other Christians by making them uncomfortable. To help us do that, here's a **five fold test** that we can use whenever we have to decide between various options in controversial matters:

1. The EDIFICATION Test – **1 Corinthians 6:12** Paul makes this claim, "*I have the right to do anything – but not everything is beneficial. I have the right to do anything – but I will not be mastered by anything.*" The first question we need to ask ourselves is how my decision is going to affect me, my faith. Will it build me up as a believer to go forward and to a higher rung in my faith or cause me to backslide. As believers we have been given a great deal of freedom in Christ, set free in numerous ways, but not

- everything we are free to do is beneficial to us, so choose wisely, choosing only those things that cause you to continue to grow and mature in the Lord!
2. The EXAMPLE Test – **1 Timothy 4:12** Paul instructs his understudy Timothy, ***“Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.”*** The second question we need to ask ourselves is how my decision is going to affect other believers. Will it build them up or cause them to fall? Will I be a good example or bad example of a Christ follower, especially to those weaker believers who are new or struggling with their faith? Paul also called his followers to imitate him as he imitates Christ – **1 Corinthians 11:1**, ***“Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.”*** Effective discipleship means mature believers are good models for less mature believers to follow and imitate!
 3. The EVANGELISM Test – **Matthew 12:30** Jesus said, ***“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”*** The third question we need to ask ourselves is how my decision is going to affect my witness to unbelievers, those who we interact with on a daily basis. How will my decision be seen by the lost? Will my example draw the lost to Christ or drive them further away? Here in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells us that everything we do either draws people to Him or pushes them further away. There’s no neutral ground here, you’re either with Christ or against Christ. Every deed you do or word you say has an affect on others, it’s either positive or negative – never neutral!
 4. The EXALTATION Test – **1 Corinthians 10:31**, ***“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”*** The fourth question we need to ask ourselves is how my decision affects God. Will this bring glory to God? Will God bless what I am doing or the decision I am making? Paul reminds us here in his letter to the Corinthians that we are to do everything to the glory of God, even the minor things, the things we may think are trivial and unimportant, they all matter to God. God’s glory needs to be considered in everything we do and say!
 5. The EMBARRASSMENT Test – **1 John 2:28**, ***“And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.”*** The fifth and final question we need to ask ourselves is would I be embarrassed to be found doing it when Jesus returns? Over the last two messages I spoke about Christ’s return and how we, as His bride, need to always be ready and waiting in anticipation

for the return of our Bridegroom, as His spotless bride because His return will be like a thief in the night, and happen in the twinkling of the eye.

When Christ returns for His holy spotless bride will He be pleased with you? If Jesus came back the moment you were doing what displeases Him, would you be embarrassed!

Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 8 is that while we have all this freedom in Christ – we are not to be the center of the universe. Instead, in love we need to think of others, being a good example as we follow and imitate Christ. YES, we have been given all of this freedom in Christ, but it's not all about us, it's all about furthering His kingdom. And the best way to be kingdom people is to follow Jesus' teaching in **Mark 8:34-37**, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”* Jesus always invites us to choose life, an abundant life by forsaking our way of life for His way of life, and it's never an easy choice to walk with Jesus, because there are always costs involved, especially in our secular culture that rewards achievements, reputation, seeking pleasure and self-gratification. Paul made the sacrifice to never do anything that may cause a weaker brother or sister to fall into sin and he has called you and me to do the same by not being a stumbling block to anyone. And we do that by following the Principle of Accommodation!