

# “ALL HALLOWS’ EVE”

Lesson on Christian Celebration of Halloween  
For The Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta  
By Sally Ulrey

## Key verses: 1 Thess 4:13-14

**Objective:** To celebrate a Christian Halloween by evaluating what pieces come from Scripture and what pieces come from other sources, and bringing life and hope into places of fear or sadness.

**The Set up:** Minimal

### The Plan:

- **Hook:** A (Holy) Ghost Story (10 mins)
  - A retelling of Acts 16:22-28 in a way that sounds like a spooky, cultish ghost story
- **Book:** Fear and Death (15 mins)
  - A look at the history of Halloween
- **Look:** To Celebrate or Not To Celebrate (20 mins)
  - Life and Hope: How Scriptures might apply to Halloween
  - Criteria for Evaluating how to engage culture around Halloween
  - Discussion about how to answer God’s call to bring life and hope
- **Took:** Prayers for Light (10 mins)
  - Using the Order for Evenings as a reminder to bring the light of life and hope and love to places of fear

### The Supplies:

- Copy of lesson
- Flashlight
- Bibles (or copies of Scripture verses page)
- Copies of small group questions if needed
- Whiteboard/Flip Chart & something to write with
- Prayer books (enough for each person to see one)
- Candles (tapers or tealights in cups, one per person)
- Clear plastic cups if needed
- Matches/Something to light with

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## **A (Holy) Ghost Story** (Hook, 10 mins)

In this section, you'll do a retelling of Acts 16:22-28, where Paul & Silas is in prison for driving out a demon. Tell the story from the perspective of the jailers, and it make it sound like the new prisoners (Paul & Silas) are crazy, scary cult followers. The point is to play up the fear aspect of the Halloween culture, and to use it as a segue to talk about how Christians are called to drive out fear with love and hope. This will move into the roots of the pagan festival that Halloween took over...the pagan festival was based in fear of death and spirits, and the church used it as an opportunity to talk about the Christian view of death and, really, resurrection.

Other ideas:

- You can do this as part of a Halloween youth group party or other festivities.
- If you want to play up the fear part of the (Holy) Ghost story, get a flashlight, turn off all the lights, and shine it on your face, or even play some cricket woods noises in the background. You can try to make it more scary (within reason, feel the group), or more campy as needed.
- If you have enough time in advance, you could ask a youth who is good at creative writing to enhance the (Holy) Ghost story, retelling it their own way.

Tell the story (see example below)

**Transition:** This Ghost Story actually turned out to be a Holy Ghost story, but it's told in a way that plays up the fear. There's an aspect of Halloween that is about fear and death, and as Christians, we need to be like Paul and Silas, and bring life and hope and love to our spaces to drive out that fear.

## **Fear and Death** (Book, 15 mins)

In this section, we explore the different cultural influences on Halloween, including pagan roots and the influences of our modern culture, which has a lot to do with fear and death. Then we'll look at a Christian view of death (& resurrection), and how Christians tried to (and still try) to bring hope and life into their spheres of influence.

- Put the youth in 5 groups or pairs.
- Have each group read a little write up about the history surrounding Halloween, and present their findings to the group
- Give the groups about 5 mins to read, and 5 mins to present (about a minute per group). Keep things moving.

**Summary** (if they generally cover these points in their presentations, **then you don't have to say all this**):

1. **Pagan roots**: There was an end of the harvest pagan festival called Samhain (pronounced sow-wen). The change of season from harvest to fall/winter reminded them of **death** and **dying**. There was a lot of **fear** there, and they tried to ward off evil spirits of the dead.
2. **Christian "take over"**: When Christian missionaries came to evangelize the Celtic pagans, they often used pieces of their culture as a bridge to talking about God. (ex. St. Patrick used the shamrock to explain the Trinity, etc.). So the festival Samhain (which was about death), they used as an **opportunity** to talk about the Christian view of death and **resurrection**.
3. **American influences**: Modern celebration of Halloween is often still focused on fear (scary Halloween movies, etc.) But mostly, it's moved to a **community event** that's part of American culture, mainly including candy and fun activities for kids.
4. **Christian "take over" #2**: There is a movement among newer Christian denominations to "take back" Halloween for Christ by not celebrating Halloween because of its pagan roots, and instead doing Fall Festivals, etc, (which is funny, since Christians already DID take back that holiday for Christ by providing alternative ideas to celebrate it in a Christian way).
5. **The Episcopal Church**: The Book of Occasional Services has a service for All Hallow's Eve. It talks about light in darkness, then some weird Scriptures, like the time Samuel's ghost appeared, or the spiritual war in heaven between angels and demons. The point is that Episcopalians acknowledge there is a **spiritual realm**, but we **don't have to be afraid** of it or play up the fear aspect (because we have the Holy Spirit), just like we don't have to be afraid of death (because we have the hope of resurrection)

**Review**: Now let's review to see if you know which Halloween tradition came from where: Pagans, Christianity, or American Culture.

Chart to write on the Board

<b>Tradition</b>	<b>Origin</b>
Trick or Treating	Pagan, American Culture
Costumes	Pagan, Christian
Bonfires	Pagan, Christian

**Transition**: To Celebrate or Not To Celebrate...that is the question. Christians are divided on this.

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## **To Celebrate or Not to Celebrate** (Look, 20 mins total, 10 mins for Scripture, 10 mins for discussion)

In this part, youth will decide whether they think each Scripture supports celebrating Halloween or is against it. Then, we'll come up with some criteria to evaluate what ways celebrating Halloween could be appropriate. The point is that there are lots of ways for us to engage the culture in a way that drives away fear by bringing life and hope. That's what we need to do as Christians.

### **Sides of Scripture (10 mins)**

- Have youth in teams or pairs read the Scriptures and report if they think it supports celebrating Halloween or not and why (they don't all have to read all the Scriptures if they are doing it in teams/pairs and reporting back; you can assign one Scripture to each team)
- Some of the Scriptures, they could argue either way, so have them support their answers
- At the end, emphasize that the point is not to try to apply Scripture out of context, but rather to look for principles that will guide us.

### **Mini-Lecture: Criteria for Celebrating (5 mins)**

Here are some common themes we see in Scripture that we can apply to celebrating Halloween:

1. Christians are called to bring the hope of new life and resurrection to all around them. We aren't supposed to be fear-mongering or dwelling on death or the occult.
2. Christians have freedom in Christ (some Christians ate meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols, because they knew it was JUST FOOD...however, they didn't do this if they knew it would mess with living in peace with people—see below).
3. Christians should try to live in peace with people, and shouldn't do anything to set a bad example or cause harm.
4. Christians should be encouraged to follow their conscience in applying these principles to their own lives. That is why some don't celebrate Halloween at all, and their sincerely held beliefs should be respected.

### **Discussion Questions (5 mins)**

(These can either be done with the entire group while you facilitate, or the questions can be printed up ahead of time as handouts or projected, and they can do this in small groups)

1. Henri Poincare said, "To doubt everything, or, to believe everything are two equally convenient solutions; both dispense with the necessity of reflection." So let's reflect/evaluate. Given these Scriptures and principles, what do you think is appropriate for a Christian? What kind of activities do you think would be going "too far" for a Christian toward one extreme or the other?
2. How has this lesson challenged your thoughts about how to celebrate Halloween?
3. What are some ways YOU can bring light and life and hope into your celebration of Halloween this time? (Share these with the larger group)

Transition: To celebrate or not to celebrate and how you do that is really between God and you, but as Christians, no matter what we do, we need to bring light and life and hope into the places where there is fear.

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## **Prayers for Light** (Took, 10 mins)

This is a reminder to take light of love, hope, and life into the dark spaces of fear and sadness. We'll use the Order for Evenings on BCP 109.

- Light a candle in the middle
- Lead or pick a youth to lead the Order for Evenings on BCP 109
- Right before the Phos Hilaron (BCP 112), have the youth light their candles from the center candle, explaining that we are to be filled with God's light, and we are to be sources of light in the world.
- After The Order for Evenings concludes, (extinguish the candles for safety) allow the youth to take their candles with them as a reminder to be lights.

## **(Holy) Ghost Story**

Retelling of Acts 16:22-28

(You can use this example story, or write your own, or have a youth who's good at creative writing do it. The point is to tell the story, playing up the fear factor, and making it seem like the Christians are the crazy cult people. You can try to make this really scary, or more campy...up to you)

It's almost Halloween, and some people like to tell scary stories on that night. So now, I'm going to tell you a weird story. This is a true story, actually. Passed down through the generations, father to son and mother to daughter, and now, I'm passing it on to you.

A long time ago, there was a jail. It was the kind of jail where prisoners were still held by metal chains behind metal doors in bare stone rooms illuminated by candlelight, with no beds, leaky roofs, musty smells, and only bread and water for sustenance. One particular night, things seemed darker and more eerie than normal. The wind was howling, the doors creaked, you could hear the chains clanking and scraping as the prisoners moaned and shifted in their cells. The prison guards got word of a couple of dangerous prisoners coming in. The commander of the guard wanted a close eye kept on them. It was rumored that they had something to do with a new cult, and they were powerful. Whatever they had done, it was rumored to have something to do with the supernatural. They might just have used cheap tricks, but no one knew how they could do the crimes they were accused of, so they weren't taking any chances. For the commander to order them watched more closely meant he was being very cautious. Maybe he was even scared. The guards heard a shout outside the prison. The prisoners had arrived. They had been beaten bloody. Blood covered their faces and was spattered all over their clothes. And they were wild-eyed, alert, but calm. Cool. Collected. Not afraid. Like they had the kind of power no one could mess with. It was very unsettling.

The guards opened the prison doors and quickly escorted the prisoners to the inner cell, meaning that were behind multiple sets of locked bars, and chained both their hands and feet. They weren't taking any chances. Once the transfer was complete, the guards breathed a sigh of relief, and went back to their posts.

Not long after, the two prisoners started chanting something in another language. It gave the guards chills, but they didn't intervene. The prisoners kept it up, and starting whispering incantations between their eerily chanted music. They started low at first. Slow, deliberate. Were they summoning the spirits of the dead? Were they calling up a ghost? But it was building and rising in intensity and fervor as the clocked neared midnight, and the other prisoners grew fearful and restless. The two dangerous prisoners in the inner cell were whipping everything up into a frenzy. It felt as if the whole prison was shaking just from the fervor of their voices. Then they realized the prison WAS shaking. The earth was shaking violently. Dust was coming off the stone walls that were threatening to topple down! The prison bars were creaking, threatening to come off their hinges, but the worst noise of all was the chains! The chains of all the prisoners were clanking and scraping. And all the while, the frenzied chanting and the violent shaking continued, until the chains came unfastened from the walls, and the doors fell off their hinges, and the prisoners became eerily silent.

The jailer woke up and saw the bars were off their hinges, and all was silent, and he was terrified. What had happened? It seemed to him that all the prisoners had escaped. He toyed with the idea of going back there to check, but he quickly decided against the terror caused by that plan. If those powerful, dangerous men were back there, waiting for him, he was a dead man. But if they weren't back there, he knew he would lose his life anyway for losing those prisoners. He felt he had no choice. He drew his sword to face death at his own

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hands. At least that way he knew where death would come from, and the terror of it all was lessened. He closed his eyes and pointed his sword at his heart. Right before he could make the effort, he heard a shout so near to him, he startled and almost dropped the sword. "Do not harm yourself" a powerful voice said. Immediately, he obeyed.

He didn't know why, but he obeyed. He called for lights, and the guards lit the lanterns. Curiously, he was no longer afraid. He rushed into the cell of the two dangerous prisoners who were now free without any logical explanation. He fell trembling at their feet, overwhelmed with gratitude that they had not left and his life could be spared. He was amazed at this power. Power that had physically saved them, and had physically saved his own life. And he asked them,

"What must I do to be saved?"

....

As it turns out, I may not be the first one to tell you this story. You may have heard it before. It is, I guess, a Ghost Story....It's a Holy Ghost Story, to be more exact. It's a story from Acts, and it is a true story (although my version is a little bit embellished to make a point about fear). It's the story of when Paul and Silas drove out a demon from a girl, healing her, and then they were beaten and put in jail because her masters used her to make money, and her healing lost them their profit. Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns to God while in prison, and there was an earthquake which freed them. They did stop the jailer from committing suicide, and they were able to share the good news of the gospel with him, and he and his family became believers (you can read about it in Acts 16).

Paul and Silas did then what they did best: they brought life and hope into the dark places where there was fear and death. And that's our call, too.

## **Group 1—Halloween & The Pagans**

Read the following and present your findings to the group. What Halloween traditions come from these pagan roots?

*The popular name for this festival is Halloween. It was the eve of Samhain, a pagan Celtic celebration of the beginning of winter and the first day of the new year. This time of the ingathering of the harvest and the approach of winter apparently provided a reminder of human mortality. It was a time when the souls of the dead were said to return to their homes. Bonfires were set on hilltops to frighten away evil spirits.*

*([http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/109399\\_13696\\_ENG\\_HTM.htm](http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/109399_13696_ENG_HTM.htm))*

*To commemorate the event, Druids built huge sacred bonfires, where the people gathered to burn crops and animals as sacrifices to the Celtic deities. During the celebration, the Celts wore costumes, typically consisting of animal heads and skins, and attempted to tell each other's fortunes.*

*[There was an] ancient practice of leaving food and wine for roaming spirits.*

*(<http://www.history.com/topics/halloween/history-of-halloween>)*



## **Group 2—Halloween & The Early Church**

Read the following and present your findings to the group. What did the Early Church contribute to the celebration of Halloween?

*Samhain was a popular festival at the time when the British Isles were converted to Christianity. The church "adopted" this time of celebration for Christian use by observing All Saints' Day on Nov. 1, and All Hallows' Eve on the evening of Oct. 31.*

*([http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/109399\\_13696\\_ENG\\_HTM.htm](http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/109399_13696_ENG_HTM.htm))*

*It is widely believed today that the church was attempting to replace the Celtic festival of the dead with a related, but church-sanctioned holiday. All Souls Day was celebrated similarly to Samhain, with big bonfires, parades, and dressing up in costumes as saints, angels and devils ... .*

*During the festivities, poor citizens would beg for food and families would give them pastries called "soul cakes" in return for their promise to pray for the family's dead relatives. The distribution of soul cakes was encouraged by the church as a way to replace the ancient practice of leaving food and wine for roaming spirits. The practice, which was referred to as "going a-souling" was eventually taken up by children who would visit the houses in their neighborhood and be given ale, food, and money.*

*(<http://www.history.com/topics/halloween/history-of-halloween>)*

### **Group 3—Halloween & American Culture**

Read the following and present your findings to the group. What did American culture contribute to the celebration of Halloween?

*In the late 1800s, there was a move in America to mold Halloween into a holiday more about community and neighborly get-togethers than about ghosts, pranks and witchcraft. ... Parents were encouraged by newspapers and community leaders to take anything “frightening” or “grotesque” out of Halloween celebrations. Because of these efforts, Halloween lost most of its superstitious and religious overtones by the beginning of the twentieth century.*

*Between 1920 and 1950, the centuries-old practice of trick-or-treating was also revived. Trick-or-treating was a relatively inexpensive way for an entire community to share the Halloween celebration. In theory, families could also prevent tricks being played on them by providing the neighborhood children with small treats. A new American tradition was born, and it has continued to grow. Today, Americans spend an estimated \$6 billion annually on Halloween, making it the country’s second largest commercial holiday.*

*(<http://www.history.com/topics/halloween/history-of-halloween>)*

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#### **Group 4—“Taking Back” Halloween & the Modern Church (con)**

Read the following and present your findings to the group. How does the modern church celebrate Halloween?

**Perspective from Christians who don't celebrate Halloween:** *God is a God of life, but Halloween focuses on death. Should I celebrate a holiday where people decorate their front yards with tombstones?... Witchcraft is clearly detestable to the Lord... Shouldn't something that glorifies witchcraft (just take a walk through the Halloween store) be detestable to me as well?... Setting aside a day to celebrate evil, darkness, witchcraft, fear, death and the demonic brings disdain to God.*

<http://www.charismanews.com/opinion/52738-why-christians-absolutely-should-not-celebrate-halloween>

#### **Alternatives to Halloween**

Many Christians choose not to observe Halloween. As one of the most popular holidays in our culture...it can present a challenge for [Christian families](#), especially when children are involved. Although I won't discuss here all the "whys" and "why nots," and [what the Bible says about Halloween](#), I will offer some fun and practical alternatives to enjoy this year with your family. Instead of focusing on the negative aspects of Halloween, you can turn the holiday into a positive, relationship-building tradition for your family..... Pumpkin Carving, Fall Decorating, Noah's Ark Party, Fall Festival, Carnival

<http://christianity.about.com/od/holidaytips/ss/halloweenaltern.htm#showall>

#### **Other Alternatives:**

Other Christians attempt to use the fear factor of Halloween to their advantage. "Hell House" is a franchised, church-sponsored haunted house that opens around Halloween. Other "fear-inducing outreaches" include Judgment House and Revelation Walk....

The stated idea behind these Christian alternatives to Halloween is to put the devil on center stage. In Hell House, for example, "demons" guide kids through scenes "depicting the hell and destruction that Satan and this world can bestow on those who choose not to serve Jesus Christ." Kids are led through such staged traumas as an abortion, a suicide, a school shooting or death by AIDS - then into a meeting in "hell" with the "devil."

"... Through the vehicle of drama, it vividly communicates to every witness that there is a spiritual battle raging each day that we live. That battle is for the eternal destiny of their soul, and if they choose to follow the world's pathway the results will be a very real hell on earth in their lives as well as an eternal hell," Hell House's Website explains.

Finally, the kids are rescued out of hell by angels who take them to "heaven" to meet "Jesus." Before they leave, the kids can pray for their salvation.

<http://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/halloween/christians-devise-a-number-of-alternatives-to-halloween-1074542.html>

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## Group 5—Halloween & The Modern Church (pro)

Read the following and present your findings to the group. How does the modern church celebrate Halloween?

**Perspective from Christians who do celebrate Halloween:** "Early on, Christians would dress up in costumes as the devil, ghosts, goblins and witches precisely to make the point that those things were defeated and overthrown by the resurrected Jesus Christ," Cameron continued. "The costumes poke fun at the fact that the devil and other evils were publicly humiliated by Christ at His resurrection. That's what the Scriptures say, that He publicly humiliated the devil when He triumphed over power and principality and put them under his feet. Over time you get some pagans who want to go this is our day, high holy day of Satanic church, that this is all about death, but Christians have always known since the first century that death was defeated, that the grave was overwhelmed, that ghosts, goblins, devils are foolish has-beens who used to be in power but not anymore. That's the perspective Christians should have." ~Kirk Cameron

[\(http://www.christianpost.com/news/kirk-cameron-on-halloween-christians-should-have-the-biggest-party-on-the-block-128345/\)](http://www.christianpost.com/news/kirk-cameron-on-halloween-christians-should-have-the-biggest-party-on-the-block-128345/)

**The Episcopal Church:** The evening of Oct. 31, which precedes the church's celebration of All Saints' Day on Nov. 1. The BOS provides a form for a service on All Hallows' Eve. This service begins with the Prayer for Light, and it includes two or more readings from scripture. The options for the readings include the Witch of Endor (1 Sm 28:3-25), the Vision of Eliphaz the Temanite (Jb 4:12-21), the Valley of Dry Bones (Ez37:1-14), and the War in Heaven (Rv 12:[1-6]7-12). The readings are followed by a psalm, canticle, or hymn, and a prayer. The BOS notes that "suitable festivities and entertainments" may precede or follow the service, and there may be a visit to a cemetery or burial place.

[http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/109399\\_13696\\_ENG\\_HTM.htm](http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/109399_13696_ENG_HTM.htm)

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## Scriptures Pertaining to Halloween

Which ones support celebrating it, and which ones don't?

*Rom.13:12: Let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.*

*2 Cor 6:14: Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?*

*Deut. 18:10-13: Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft,<sup>11</sup> or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead.<sup>12</sup> Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD; because of these same detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you.<sup>13</sup> You must be blameless before the LORD your God.*

*Matt 5:14-16: "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.<sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.<sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."*

*1 Cor 10:23-33: "I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive.<sup>24</sup> No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.<sup>25</sup> Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience,<sup>26</sup> for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."<sup>27</sup>*

*<sup>27</sup> If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience.<sup>28</sup> But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience.<sup>29</sup> I am referring to the other person's conscience, not yours. For why is my freedom being judged by another's conscience?<sup>30</sup> If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?*

*<sup>31</sup> So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.<sup>32</sup> Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—<sup>33</sup> even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.*

*1 Thess 4:13-14: Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no **hope**.<sup>14</sup> For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*

*John 11:25-26: Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the **life**. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;<sup>26</sup> and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

*1 Cor 15:42: So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable*

All Scripture from the [New International Version \(NIV\)](#)

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