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October 30, 2009

History of Halloween and All Saints' Day

Dear Readers,

Halloween, or All Hallows' Eve, as it is more appropriately called, dates back to around the years in range of 200 to 300 AD. In about the same time period there developed a day on the liturgical calendar that was known as Hallow Mass. It was a day for Christian people and the church to celebrate those who had died and already joined the eternal kingdom.

Hallow, as in "hallowed be thy name" means to make holy or set apart for holy use, to consecrate. It means to respect greatly, to venerate, and to devote.

As things developed, Hallow Mass became designated as All Saints' Day. Pre-Reformation liturgical calendars included special days set aside for oodles of the various Saints of the church. To be a saint required meeting certain criteria in the pre-Reformation church. And that remains the case for our Catholic brothers and sisters today.

Yet, one day has been designated since the 3rd century as a day for remembering and celebrating All Saints. That day has been November 1st and the Lord's Day following it. Halloween, the eve of All Hallows' used to be closely tied to All Saints' Day.





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The idea of such days sound rather pagan to our ears, but in the ancient and medieval world they made sense. The idea was that on the day before All Saints' Day the saints had to be summoned or awakened of sorts. The problem being, that if you awaken spirits from beyond--you awaken not only the good but the bad too. So on the evening before, people put out lanterns, called Devil's lanterns, in order to drive away evil spirits and horrible things. Today we call Devil's lanterns, Jack-o-lanterns. It's the same thing.

Having driven away all the evil spirits, the Hallow Mass could be celebrated in purity and hope that all the goodness of those who died in the faith would dwell with those still living.

At the time of the Reformation, the liturgical calendar was drastically simplified. Most celebrations of the church were thrown out and completely done away with. In general, seasons were retained, but days were tossed out. The reformers, however, kept All Saints' Day as a celebration for the church. They regarded it as a holy day to celebrate and remember those who have died and the ways in which their lives point the living to Christ.

To us, as Reformed people, a Saint is anyone, dead or alive, who stands as a witness to others. Anyone who lives in a way that directs others to the love of God--those people are saints.

That's the background of All Saints' Day.

It is truly a Presbyterian Celebration in the regard that it points to us the need to examine our church and ourselves and ask, "How is God working in me?" "How does God want to use me?" "What is God showing me through my past, my ancestors, my brothers and sisters gathered here this morning?"

Blessings,
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