

## The Evangelical Mind

### Making Real Decisions About Halloween

By Richard Mouw

Someone remarked recently that Halloween has become our national Mardi Gras, and I believe it. You don't have to do much careful research to conclude that the Halloween season has gotten longer in recent years and that the focus is no longer primarily on children. Certainly, the costume displays I have been seeing in Southern California since mid-September are not dominated by Casper the Friendly Ghost outfits and pint-size witch's hats for kids. Most of the stuff is meant for raucous parties for big people.

I enjoyed Halloween as a kid. And my evangelical parents, not otherwise known for their laxity in enforcing standards against "worldly" behaviors, let me enjoy the day. Indeed, they enjoyed it, too. As soon as I was able to walk, they dressed me up in a homemade costume and took me door-to-door collecting treats. They themselves laid in plenty of candy supplies for the neighborhood kids, and they even on occasion turned our basement into a pseudo-horror chamber as a setting for a Halloween party for the church youth group. We knew some evangelical folks, of course, who thought Halloween was "of the devil"; but we considered them to be supercilious killjoys.

There aren't too many things that I am more conservative about than the evangelical generation that raised me, but this is one of them. I still am not a hard-liner on the subject. My grandson's preschool puts on a Halloween party, and I don't lose sleep worrying about what they are doing to his soul. But evangelicals have been getting stricter on this matter, and I am sympathetic to the trend.

Halloween can be traced to ancient times, when some pagans set aside a day to commemorate the end of summer. The spirits of dead people returned to earth at this time, they believed, taking the forms of cats and witches and the like. Fearful that these spirits might do them harm, people attempted to scare them away by building fires and displaying pictures of grotesque faces. They would also place food offerings at their doors, hoping that any visiting spirits would take the treat and forget the trick. Our lighted carved pumpkins, masks, and trick-or-treat rituals have their origins in these practices.

Christians can know all this and still not automatically be opposed to Halloween celebrations as such. We need to be aware here of what logicians call "the genetic fallacy" — which occurs when we assume that because something started off with a certain meaning, it still has that meaning. Many of our Christian holy days, and the practices associated with them, have pagan origins — but this does not mean that we should not have Christmas trees in our homes or celebrate Easter at a time when the ground begins to "birth" new life.

But should Christians have special worries about Halloween? I think so. At least, we ought to be increasingly nervous about Halloween practices in light of new developments in our culture. When I was growing up, witches and ghosts were things we only read about in children's storybooks. Today, with the re-emergence of Wicca and the new interest in seances and "channeling," they are a very visible religious presence in our culture.

At the very least, this means that Christians cannot view Halloween as just another innocent childhood ritual. For many of our contemporaries, it has become, as it was in ancient times, a time to acknowledge the presence of very spiritual forces of good and evil in our lives. For others, the yearly event has provided a new excuse to thumb their noses at traditional standards of decency and decorum.

Does this mean no "dress up" for Christian children? Not necessarily. That needs to be a family decision. But it must *be* a decision. We can no longer take "innocent" Halloweens for granted. At the very least, it means that Christian families and churches need to do some serious instructing about what Halloween means to many people. And we must be especially diligent in teaching ourselves and our children that the real antidote to the threat of evil has been provided through the death and resurrection of the One who is the Lord of all our days and nights.