

Editorial: Halloween, culture & faith in the real world

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Don't be creeped out, but Halloween is sneaking up on us.

It should be a hum-dinger this year, what with vampires, werewolves and zombies all the rage on TV and in movies.

Boo!

✘ Editor Marv Knox Of course, Halloween is the scariest holiday. Nobody knows that better than careful, cautious parents. Black magic, demons and ghouls present paradoxes for moms and dads who try to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord: How can they affirm spiritual values, still let the kiddoes enjoy fun and frivolity with their friends, and refuse to romanticize gore, violence and general creepiness, not to mention voodoo and witchcraft?

No doubt, you know parents who don't allow their children to participate in Halloween festivities. Maybe they let the young 'uns dress up and attend the "Fall Festival" or "Trunk or Treat" at church. Or maybe they stay home, turn off the porch light, hang out in the back of the house and hold on until Nov. 1.

Other parents—Joanna and I were among them—help the kids pick out costumes, carve pumpkins into jack o'lanterns, stand by the door to pass out treats and, after all the little ghosts and goblins trudge home, try to talk their kids out of a few candy bars. They don't condone dark arts and evil. But they think the worst result of the night is insomnia brought on by too much sugar, not pagan chicanery.

Mutual respect?

Now, I've always respected parents who look askance at Halloween. They've got the sole responsibility for raising their daughters and sons, and they have a right to set the bounds of propriety. If they don't want their kids to dress up as Spiderman and Snow White and mix and mingle with headless horsemen and Lord Voldemort, that's their business. I always hoped they showed us the same respect. That hope rarely received confirmation. But one can hope, can't one?

Halloween reactions create a microcosm of a larger issue: How should Christians respond to culture and "the world" around us? It's not a simple question, is it? In fact, one of the greatest books ever written—[*Christ and Culture*](#) by the late ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr—plumbs the depths of that question and offers five major historic approaches.

Ultimately, Christians who believe Jesus came to redeem the world must work to transform it. Ironically, that can provide cover for parents who hide out until Halloween howls over as well as parents who dress up and stand out on the sidewalk while their kids ring doorbells and shout, "Trick or treat!"

Finding common ground

They can find common ground in how they help children navigate the event. Children love make-believe and enjoy exercising their imaginations. This practice is vital for creativity, resourcefulness and ingenuity—traits vital for a full and meaningful life. Parents provide interpretation, meaning and boundaries, whether they shun or engage culture.

At Halloween, lessons can be learned by contrasting the negative and highlighting the positive. Children can learn the difference between pretend and real. They can hear that love is greater than evil. And they can appreciate good-natured fun and frivolity.

Whether children dress up and fill plastic pumpkins with candy or stay put at home, learning from cultural events is a treat that doesn't demand a trick.