

BULLETIN

Equipping Today's Church Leaders

Volume 1, Issue 5

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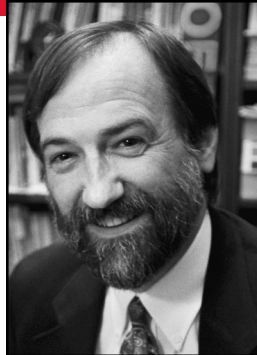
Robert (Bo) Irvin

ENGAGING

Christmas: Not Just For Pagans

Harry L. Poe, Ph.D.

Charles Colson Professor of Faith and Culture



Randall Bush, professor of philosophy at Union University, has published a children's story for Christmas called *Gabriel's Magic Ornament*. The story has all of the "magic" of Christmas for children, but it also has a message about Christmas. The book was reviewed by a prominent national librarians' association, and the reviewer complained that the book was too Christian. How can a book about Christmas be too Christian? We have come to the strange place in our culture that people have forgotten the association between our largest merchandizing festival and God.

Christmas has become a fixed part of every person's year. All Americans celebrate Christmas. Yet, the only Americans who seem to realize that it has any religious connotations are practicing members of other religions that feel offended that Americans have imposed a Christian holy day upon them. They need not fear. Christmas as celebrated in the United States has nothing to do with Christianity. It has taken on a life of its own, like all the Christian colleges and hospitals that have disengaged from their origins.

Christmas preparations now begin in the craft stores right after Labor Day. Yet the American Christmas festival offers a unique opportunity to engage the culture with the message of Christ. Because the culture has "taken over" Christmas, it has become as normal a topic of conversation as the football scores or the stock market. In the market place, toys compete to become the hottest item each year. Television specials compete for the largest audience. Hollywood always releases a stable of new films just for "the season" that compete for the largest box office. Santa and Rudolf and Frosty and the Grinch compete for the most heart warming story. Is there room for Jesus in this cultural zoo?

Like the falling stock market, the popularity of the Christmas Story has been falling since the 1950s, but I would argue that the story itself is as compelling as ever. In fact, we may be at the right place at the right time for a major "market turn around." The Christmas Story is not merely "heart warming." It actually strikes at the deepest issues of the human heart. We can no longer assume, however, that people understand the meaning of the Christmas Story. Mary, the baby, the manger, the angels, the shepherds, and the Wise

BULLETIN

The Union University *Bulletin* is a bi-monthly publication designed to equip church leaders.

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Paul Jackson, Ph.D.
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STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



Joanna L. Stillman

Bandung, Indonesia

Senior

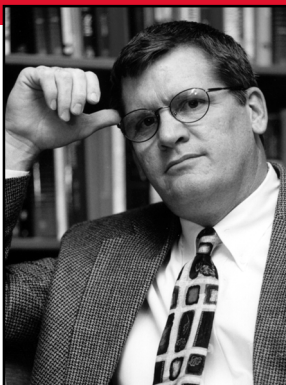
Major: English, writing

Minor: Music, voice

For the past three years of my life, Union has been a second home to me. The teachers and students at this school have become like family, helping to challenge and shape me both spiritually and academically. God has called us all to be ministers of the Gospel, each using our own talents in the various fields and countries where God places us. My professors have encouraged me to use my gifts for the Lord, striving for excellence in all things in order to give Him glory.

I know that God is using Union to equip students to go out into the world into countless types of work with a living, thoughtful faith. I'm thankful to have had the opportunity to study in such an environment.

PREACHING



The Birth of Christ (Luke 2:1-14)

Paul Jackson, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Christian Studies

Having experienced many joys in life, I believe none really compares to the Christmas Eve birth of my only son, Garrett. Holding him close, as a proud father should, I cherished the gift for whom we had prayed and received. I wanted his little toes never to get blistered, his knees never to get scraped, nor any hair on his head ever to be harmed. His arrival brought much joy into many people's lives in our extended family. If the birth of my son generated so much happiness for so many people, how much more happiness and excitement should the birth of Jesus cause for believers? His birth was especially significant and special in that Jesus was born of a virgin to be the Savior of the world. How much love did the Father express by sending His Son on this unique mission that included His death on a brutal cross? Joseph and Mary loved their Son, even though they did not understand all that His coming would entail. How seeing Jesus' execution must have pained Mary in comparison to bringing him into the world!

The greatest of all births occurred during the time when Caesar Augustus ruled the Roman Empire. He was the grand-nephew of Julius Caesar, and the first Caesar to be called "Augustus" meaning "holy" or "revered." Up to this point, only the gods commanded this title. Augustus took great strides during his regime toward making the Caesars revered as gods. Interestingly, about the time Luke wrote his gospel account, some of the Greek cities in Asia Minor adopted Caesar's birthday, September 23rd, as the first day of the New Year, hailing him as savior. In fact, there is an inscription at Halicarnassus referring to Augustus as the "savior of the world"!

Therefore, at the time of Jesus' birth, the Mediterranean world had at its helm a self-proclaimed, widely accepted god and savior. Luke purposefully wants his readers to see this situation as a deceptive grid for understanding the coming of the real savior. The contrast could not be greater!! The so-called "peace of Rome" prevailed, effectively locking the doors of the Temple of War for ten years to this time, and keeping them locked for thirty more. This, however, was not a pleasant peace; it was a Hitler's peace or a Hussein's peace—a fearful "peace in a vice." The fear of the awful grip of Rome pierced the hearts of all the inhabitants of its vast empire as it relentlessly squeezed out tribute money even at the far eastern edge of the Great Sea in a little town in Palestine. Rome's lien included every Palestinian nook and cranny town, not just the big cities. The call came not only to Memphis, but to Frog Jump as well. Once Caesar's order for the worldwide census became known, Joseph and Mary, a poor peasant couple, made the eighty mile journey to Bethlehem to be officially registered. So, here is the picture—a portly, powerful Emperor in glorious Rome putting the screws to an impoverished, bedraggled couple from a no count

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Union University Profile

- Four-year liberal arts Christian university.
- Ranked in the top tier of southern universities for the 6th consecutive year by *U.S. News and World Report* and *The Templeton Guide for Colleges that Encourage Character Development*.

Student Body Information

- 2,600 undergraduate and graduate students
- 43 states and 27 nations represented in student population
- 150 valedictorians / salutatorians
- 15 National Merit finalists

Campus

- 290-acre campus
- 2,200 seat fieldhouse, baseball and softball parks, soccer field, Olympic size swimming pool, tennis courts
- Men's and women's apartment villages with 1,160 private bedrooms
- Married housing complex for 32 families

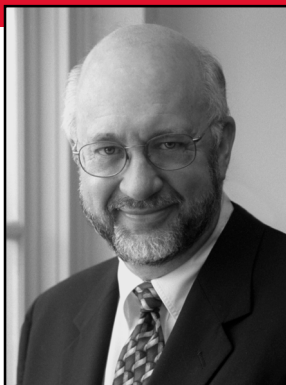
Faculty

- 80% terminal degree (doctorate equivalent)
- Student / faculty ratio 12:1

Accreditations

- Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges & Schools (Level V of Level I – V designations)
- Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education
- National Association of Schools of Music
- Teacher Education Program of the Tennessee Department of Education
- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education
- Council on Social Work Education
- National Association of Schools of Art and Design
- American Chemical Society

WORSHIPPING



Worship During Advent

Richard Joiner, Ph.D.

Chair of the Department of Music and Professor of Music

Would you like to bring a renewed sense of Christmas to your worship services, focused on the coming of Christ as foretold in prophecy and realized not only in Bethlehem but in our faith? The four Sundays of Advent prior to Christmas offer a rich period of reflection upon magnificent and prophetic scriptures, hymns and music of historic distinction, and worship processes that can become customary observances rich in symbol and meaning.

The mystery conveyed by this marvelous four weeks is similar to the way we cultivate a small child's anticipation of Santa Claus: most of the magic is in learning to wait. The God of prophecy has treated us the same way, with countless words of comfort, anticipation, and event. Our worship practices during Advent and on into Christmas, therefore, offer opportunities to shepherd our congregations from hope to joy and from darkness to light.

By observing Advent prior to Christmas, our purpose is to personalize the experiences of God's people as they waited through endless eons for the Savior. The numerous scriptures of Messianic prophecy, for instance, especially those from Isaiah, may be presented on each of the four Sundays in readings by pastor or by pastor and people responsively. These also provide a rich repository for sermons that stress the God of prophecy, the God of light, and the God of deliverance. Hymns which deal specifically with Advent may be found in sections of the hymnal organized under that title. While not all of these hymns may be familiar, the reader is invited to pore over their stanzas for a greater understanding of the prophecies and themes of Christ's coming associated with the period.

The worship leader is not limited to these congregational expressions alone, however. Drawing upon the unique emphases of this magical season, additional seasonal hymns and carols can become most meaningful. For instance, each stanza of "Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne and Thy Kingly Crown" closes with the simple but beautiful invitation, "O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, There is room in my heart for Thee." Clearly, the emphasis on the coming of Christ is focused here on its complete purpose, the advent of Christ in the heart of the believer. In one of the most popular of Christmas hymns, "O Come All Ye Faithful," the one who comes is not only our Lord, but the believer who approaches the God of the gift. Other Christmas hymns reference the prophecy of His coming. "Joy to the World," for example, is literally laced with prophecies of the coming Messiah: "No more let sins and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found."

Advent can be more than singing and scripture reading. As a fairly old observance in the Christian church, Advent has come to be presented in various meaningful and symbolic

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ways. The association of Advent with the coming of light can be enacted on Sunday mornings prior to Christmas simply by beginning the service in darkness with an introductory scripture (Isaiah 9:2, "The people that walked in darkness..." is an obvious example), then slowly raising the lights for the singing of the first hymn of praise. Some churches may elect to provide a brief ceremony during the morning service for lighting of Advent candles and reading of appropriate scriptures. An Advent wreath, available at most denominational bookstores, is helpful for this purpose. The Advent wreath supports four small purple candles, designed to be lit on each of the Advent Sundays, and a large white "Christ" candle in the center, to be lit on Christmas Eve or on Christmas Day. The Advent wreath is equally effective when utilized in home worship, when families gather for the lighting of one candle each week, prophetic scripture readings, and singing of carols.

Advent observances allow the pilgrim to live and work through the Advent season with a renewed understanding of God as a keeper of promises. The abundant theme of the Advent prophecies is that of the coming Christ, not only the Christ of Bethlehem, but the Lord of the Second Coming. The uplifting stanzas of "Joy to the World" can be read in both contexts, and remind us of the ultimate Advent promise: "Behold, I come quickly," and its response, "Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come" (Revelation 22:20). Advent is a season born out of darkness. By incorporating well-planned worship moments, however, Advent can become a cherished season of light and hope.

REVIEWING



Ray Van Neste, Ph.D.

Director, R. C. Ryan Center for Biblical Studies

Assistant Professor of Christian Studies

As we consider Advent and the coming of Christmas in this issue, I thought it might be useful to mention some resources for making this season more meaningful in our own homes. At this wonderful time of year we pastors tend to be at our busiest, and if we are not careful, while we exhort others to focus on the coming of Jesus, we can easily miss it ourselves. If we are going to preach out of a full heart we must, individually and with our families, be drinking deeply from the well of the truths and wonder of the incarnation. Therefore, this time I will mention a few books for family and personal devotion before mentioning a few useful commentaries.

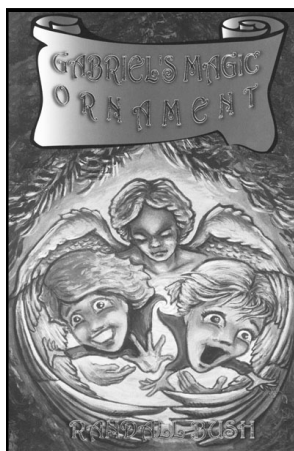
My family has especially benefited from a little book entitled, *Christ in Christmas: A Family Advent Celebration* (NavPress, 1989; \$9.00). This book is designed for use by families in a brief time of devotion in the four weeks leading up to Christmas. The book includes devotional essays (one for each week) written by James Dobson, R. C. Sproul, Chuck Swindoll and James Montgomery Boice, Scripture readings for every day, hymns and family learning activities. We have found it to be a great resource in providing some structure to a daily family gathering around the Word in anticipation of Christmas. Indeed, some of the connection between Old Testament texts has stimulated useful thoughts for sermons as well! The daily readings and prayer require 10 minutes at most (though it could be lengthened with discussion if desired) and the Sunday readings are a bit longer due to the written devotional.

A second little book that we have found encouraging is *How Great our Joy* (Broadman & Holman, 2001; \$12.99) by Ray and Anne Orlund. The reflections on the gatherings and traditions of this great, godly family (a pastor's family!) are encouraging in their own right and have stimulated ideas for the developing of our own traditions. These reflections will encourage us to keep a focus on our own families in this busy time.

A third book which I think is little known is Calvin Miller's *A Symphony in Sand* an allegorical and poetic look at the incarnation and God's work of rescuing mankind. Miller's gift with language makes this a fascinating little book which has been helpful to me in contemplating the real life situations of the Christmas story. This book is actually the second in a series (the first book is *A Requiem for Love*) by Miller, and, though they have been out of print for sometime, they have recently been re-published by Bethany House in one volume entitled *The Divine Symphony* (\$12.99).

Lastly, as we approach Christmas sermons, often dreaded because of the difficulty of preaching on the same topic year after year, new life can be brought to our sermons from

READING



Author: Randall Bush, Ph.D.

Publisher: Pristine Publishers, Inc.

Available at www.gabrielsmagicornament.com

Fans of the Lord of the Rings will have another special treat in store for them this Christmas. Union University Professor Randall Bush has written a Christmas tale that Harry L. Poe, Colson Professor of Faith and Culture at Union, says is “destined to become a classic!” Paul Fiddes, Principal of the College at Oxford where Bush finished his Doctor of Philosophy degree concurs when he comments, “No Christmas Tree will ever look the same again after you have read Randall Bush’s piece of Christmas magic!”

Bush’s enchanting yuletide fantasy, entitled *Gabriel’s Magic Ornament*, will appeal to “kids” from nine to ninety-nine. Readers will experience the excitement and wonder of Christmas afresh as they are whisked away into the imaginary land of Arboria. Packed with magical adventure, mystery, and suspense, this humorous but sometimes serious tale reveals how Arboria and its hollow and hopeless Orna folk fall under a powerful evil spell no one can seem to break. Selfishness, greed, and hatred threaten to destroy Arboria and bring its people to a miserable end, but just when everything seems hopeless, a secret gift of true magic draws the story to a surprising and wonderful conclusion.

Engaging...continued from page 1

Men make for high drama and a sweet story, but what does it all mean?

The story of God coming into the world as a man has powerful implications for some of the most pervasive issues of our culture as it spins into postmodern chaos. While Islam offers a picture of God as one who judges and executes, the Christmas Story describes a God with a compassionate face who entered into creation to show his care and concern for people. While Hinduism offers a non-personal picture of God as an unknowable, unconscious force, the Christmas Story describes a personal God who desires relationship and takes joy in being known. While Buddhism denies the existence of the physical world and all individuals at the same time that it denies the existence of a self-conscious, personal God, the Christmas Story describes a God who created the universe and chose to identify with us in that universe and walk a mile in our shoes. While naturalism and utilitarianism deny the reality of love other than as a mutually beneficial transaction, the Christmas Story describes a God who loves people regardless of the cost – even to death on a cross. While existentialism bemoans the dread of human alienation and isolation, the Christmas Story describes a God who entered the world to reconcile us to Himself.

The Christmas Story strikes at the heart of the most profound issues of life. It is not necessary for Christians to create the issues or raise the issues. They already belong to the public conversation. Postmodern people do not have the same difficulty with spiritual experience and the possibility of the miraculous that the modern age had. They may listen politely to the Christmas Story and think it is just another pretty religious story. They may accept the virgin birth and the angel choir. What they will miss unless we explain it, however, is that the story means something. It is a story that fundamentally challenges all other understandings of God and our place in the universe.

Reviewing...continued from page 4

close readings of the text and awareness of background, setting, Old Testament connections, etc. There are several good commentaries which can help us in this. For the gospel of Luke, the recent 2 volume commentary by Darrell Bock is a mine of useful information. The mammoth size of the commentary may be intimidating, but Bock has carefully arranged his material to allow the reader to grasp the message of each section without necessarily wading through all the technicalities. On Matthew, the commentary by D. A. Carson (Expositors Bible Commentary, vol. 8, bound with Mark and Luke, or separately as two paperback volumes) continues to be a source of delight for me. Carson provides a great deal of useful thoughts for preaching on Christmas, even in surprising places (like the genealogy in chapter 1!). Lastly the NAC volumes on Matthew (by Craig Blomberg) and Luke (by Robert Stein) are among the best in the series. These leading scholars expound the text with the preacher in view.

If we will reflect regularly on the coming of Christ with our families and make use of these wonderful resources in studying the biblical text afresh, we can expect to find our hearts enlarged, spirits refreshed and will strengthened to live out and proclaim the glories of our God, Immanuel, who came to get us.

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for church leaders

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First Baptist Church
Snellville, Georgia

Dr. Kevin Ezell, Pastor
Highview Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky

Theme:

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9:00 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.

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UNION UNIVERSITY
Jackson, Tennessee

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PREACHING...continued from page 2

town in the hill country of Galilee. But, here is the paradox—the baby Mary carried was not a Caesar, a man who would become a god; rather in her womb grew a far more significant wonder—the true God.

How God Did It (6-7)

The incarnation, or the “infleshing of God,” while theologically inexplicable, is couched in what R. Kent Hughes calls a “haunting simplicity.” *“While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son.”* Hotel accommodations were, at best, primitive in Bethlehem. In Palestine, it took the crudest of forms. Typically, these “inns” incorporated a series of stalls erected on the inside of an enclosure that featured an open-air courtyard where the animals slept. But, they could not take advantage of even that much less than antiseptic condition as they saw the first-century “No Vacancy” sign flashing when they walked up to the inn.

If you have children, do you remember the pains taken to ensure the cleanliness and sterility of your child’s grand entrance? And do you remember the careful supervision the medical staff assumed over you and your wife? The circumstances surrounding Garrett’s birth scared us because he came by way of emergency C-section. Evidently, he had squeezed the umbilical cord under his arm subsequently shutting off his air supply. Once in peril, it took little time to cut Janet open and scoop Garrett out. Swallowing amniotic fluid necessitated an hour’s worth of suctioning his lungs. After the surgery, no one was watching Janet as she lay there unable to breathe until someone happened to see her oxygen mask had slipped off. Garrett’s birth was anything but ordinary. Had we lived under the shadow of Augustus, I would have lost them both that night. In fact, mortality rates were much higher then than now.

So, everything worked against Jesus and his frustrated parents. The Savior’s entrance into this world proved a great challenge. But, herein lays the beauty and the wonder of Jesus’ birth and the gospel. We must never forget this is where Christianity emerged; where it always emerges; with a helpless sense of need, a graced sense of one’s inadequacy. It is certainly a paradox. Listen to Augustine’s idea: Unspeakably wise, He is wisely speechless. Lancelot Andrewes, one of the KJV’s Old Testament translators, proclaimed before King James describing the baby Jesus as “the Word without a word.” The wonder of all wonders—Almighty God chose to come into the world through the most unlikely of all situations; born in the dirty, stench-filled confines of a stable sharing space with the animals. But, maybe that should not surprise us...every sacrifice was born in a stable.

Why God Did It (8-14).

For the last ten years I have reflected over and over about the nature of the incarnate Christ. While the best description we have is from John, *“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...”*, I think probably most Christians err on the side of hyper-divinizing Christ, or in other words, almost totally evacuate his humanity. To me, the wonder of the incarnation is that God became one of us in order to relate to us completely, and to save us from ourselves. He had real humanity. Harold Best provides for us

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STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



Robert (Bo) Charles Irvin, III

Nashville, Tennessee

Sophomore

Major: Biblical Studies Languages

Since my call to ministry the summer before my senior year of high school, I have realized that one must have the desire to grow in grace and faith through their education. Union University has challenged me in some important ways such as applying a Christian world view in everything I do. This has deepened my faith more than I could have ever imagined.

I have been deeply impressed with the relationship that the faculty and staff strive to have with the students. Faculty members are accessible to students—I can walk in their offices and dialogue with them. I know they truly care about how I apply my faith into my Christian world and life view.

PREACHING..continued from page 6

a great analogy for comprehending the magnificence and mystery of the incarnation: a symphony, in all its complexity and power—magnificence carried over a grand expanse. But when He became human, He became a folk tune, simple and shortened. In this He lost nothing of His Godhead, His eternal character, His attributes, absolute purity, and changeless excellence.

Jesus had limitless resources for sympathizing with the people He came to reconcile to His Father. He not only spoke tantalizing, penetrating, amazing words of instruction and insight, He also touched people physically! This is sometimes overlooked, but the gospel writers take pains to demonstrate Jesus as a “hands on” Savior. He touched the blind, the lame, the hated, the immoral, the poor, the lepers, the despised, and even the dead! When we think of Jesus, we normally do not think of Him as having body odor or possibly even leprosy! Nothing daunted our Lord as He related to the world around Him. He really did love people; not bound by rules, but compelled by a genuine love that never wore a disguise. This is what those who first saw Him realized about Him. The glory of the heavenly Father encompassed that little baby swaddled in that stable. His majesty already evoked praise, wonder, and awe from both an earthly ensemble of common shepherds and from an angel-led entourage of heavenly attestation. The peace that God would bring is the peace of deliverance that only can result from recognizing and accepting this true Savior. But what is going on here? Should we rightly expect the Son of God to enter the world in a location a bit more austere? The simple answer that captures the intent of Jesus overall mission is—every sacrifice was born in a stable!

GO Trips for 2003

January, 2003

Morocco

Seattle

Spring Break, 2003

Battlecreek, MI

Turkey

Boston

Romania

Illinois

Tunisia

Irving, TX

Honduras

Memphis

Please pray for our faculty, staff and students as they minister in these areas.

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



Greetings from Union University! I trust all is well with you and your ministry. I know that November and December are perhaps the two busiest months on your church calendar. You may even find it difficult to carve out time to read this issue of the Bulletin. The special events and celebrations that mark this time of year have caused many to simply refer to it as the "Holiday Season." Given all that goes on, it is easy to move from event to event and then one day realize that you are now in a new year. You have preached several sermons on Christmas and sung many Christmas carols, unfortunately, you may not have spent much time pondering anew the deep impact the birth of Christ had on the world 2,000 years ago and continues to have today. When pastors experience Christmas in this manner, it is difficult to encourage our congregations to pause and reflect on the significance of the birth of the Christ child. If we are unable to pause and reflect, then it is even more unlikely that we can consider the implications of the virgin birth on our world and life views. If we are too busy to engage in this kind of thoughtfulness, then we are simply too busy!

This issue of the Bulletin is dedicated to helping us think intentionally about Advent and its impact personally on our lives and corporately on history. All of our contributors desire that their writings will inspire you to think more Christianly about Christmas and in turn encourage you to lead your congregation through a time of thoughtful celebration of the events leading up to and including the birth of Jesus. I am certain that if you dedicate yourself to mine the riches contained within this great event, that you will be touched and will in turn make Advent more meaningful for your congregation. If we do this, I doubt we will lessen the significance of the Advent by referring to it as simply the "Holiday Season."

God is so gracious to allow you and me to serve as His instruments to build and equip His Church. I pray He uses this publication to be a blessing to your ministry.

For His Glory,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charles A. Fowler".

Charles A. Fowler

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