

Fresh Start

By Jerry Bader

If We Don't Do It Charlie Brown, Who Will?

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December 9, 1965 is not considered a red-letter day in television history; but it should be. It was on that Thursday evening that the CBS television network aired, for the first time, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. On Thursday, December 6, ABC will broadcast the Christmas classic for the 54th year.

Everything about the show was considered a high-risk gamble. The "Peanuts" comic strip was read daily by tens of millions of people. Each individual reader knew what they thought Charlie, Lucy and Linus should sound like. Would they be satisfied or put off by the TV representation of their favorites? Adding to that risk was the decision to use child voice actors, something that was unheard of at that time.

As steep as the odds already were, producers and network executives were convinced that Peanuts creator Charles Schulz was dooming the project by insisting that the show include Linus reading the Nativity Story from the book of Luke. Producer Lee Mendelson and Director Bill Melendez hated the idea of including Scripture in the broadcast. From [Wikipedia](#):

"Schulz was adamant about Linus' reading of the Bible, despite Mendelson's and Melendez's concerns that religion was a controversial topic, especially on television. Melendez recalled Schulz turned to him and remarked, "If we don't do it, who will?" Schulz's estimation proved accurate, and in the 1960s, less than nine percent of television Christmas episodes contained a substantive reference to religion, according to university researcher Stephen Lind. It could also be worth noting that the Linus' recitation of Scripture was incorporated in such a way that it forms the climax of the film, thus making it impossible to successfully edit out."

Schulz left no room for debate – No Bible, no Charlie Brown Christmas. Period. Schulz's insistence was hardly a whim. [The Atlantic reported in 2016](#) that Schulz's faith was the driving force behind Peanuts' success:

"But Schulz also revolutionized his industry by using his strip to subtly raise religious questions about the Bible, prayer, the nature of God, and the end of the world. Schulz was a devoted Christian; unshell the Peanuts and you'll find the fingerprints of his faith. By mixing Snoopy with spirituality, he made his readers laugh while inviting them into a depth of conversation uncommon to the funny pages."

"Many familiar with the Peanuts strip don't think of Charles Schulz as a Christian pioneer," said Stephen Lind, the author of *A Charlie Brown Religion: Exploring the Spiritual Life and Work of Charles M. Schulz*. "But he was a leader in American media when it comes to both the strength and frequency of religious references."

Thanks to Schulz's devotion to the Word, we hear Linus tell Charlie Brown the real meaning of Christmas by reciting Luke 2: 8-14:

*8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.
9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is*

the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

And writer [Jason Soroski made an important observation](#) in 2015; at the moment Linus reads “fear not” he drops his omnipresent security blanket. That blanket defines Linus’ character. That moment may be “the only time he has ever been seen not holding it.” It is difficult to believe Schulz did that by accident. It’s a brilliant highlighting of the importance of the verse. What Schulz likely didn’t realize is that it is also a fitting tribute to his courage to share the Word on a coast-to-coast broadcast. And how did that work out?

45% of televisions in use that evening watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. It was the second highest rated show that week (it preempted the lowly-rated *Munsters*), behind *Bonanza*. And in the half-century since its debut, it continues to be a ratings magnet every time it is shown.

Linus’ message of Christ over commercialism is one that has blessed several generations of television viewers. Just as powerful, but lesser known, is the lesson we can learn from Charles M. Schulz about never being afraid to share our faith.