

# CWR<sub>m</sub>

December 2021 **CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION**  
Volume 12, Number 6



CWR/PTM

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# Once Before Time

Greg Albrecht

The most commonly told stories of the birth of Jesus center around 1) the book of Matthew, where we read of the Star of Bethlehem and the wise men and 2) the book of Luke, where we read about the manger, the angels and the shepherds in the field.

But the Christmas story told in the Gospel of John is radically different. John doesn't write about the birth of a child and he doesn't write about Mary and Joseph.

Matthew and Luke set the stage for their story of Christmas with the town of Bethlehem and how that tiny little backwater town was the scene of the birth of Jesus, God in the flesh. But the Gospel of John expands the stage setting beyond time and space.

The word picture John paints for the backdrop of the coming of Jesus is the universe and how eternity came into human time. He speaks of the Creator of all matter becoming matter, and being one with his creation. He speaks of eternity and perfection and divinity entering into the human dimensions and limitations of time, space and matter.

John offers some breathtaking panoramas and perspectives about the big, big story of Christmas!

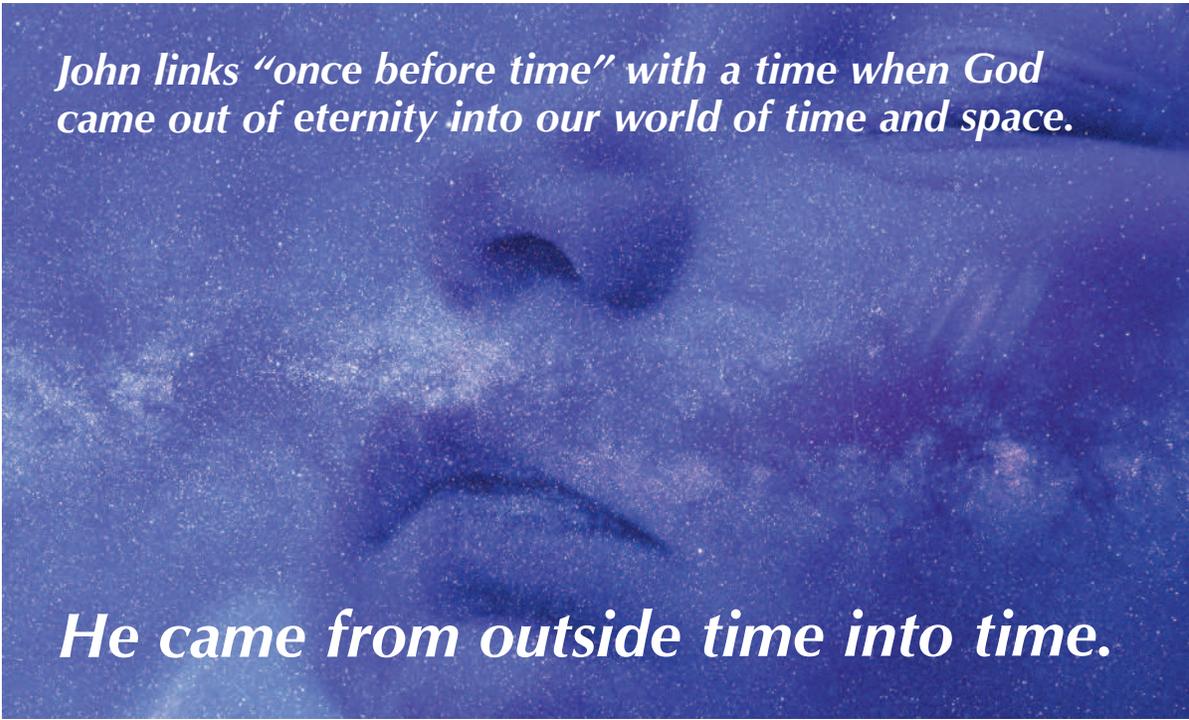
*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

*He was with God in the beginning.*

*Through him all things were made: without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.*

*The light shines in darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. —John 1:1-5*

While many stories begin with the words “once upon a time” John’s Christmas story, about eternity invading human time and space by eternity, begins with the words “in the beginning.” Instead of telling us about “once upon a time” the sense here is **“once before time.”**



*John links “once before time” with a time when God came out of eternity into our world of time and space.*

*He came from outside time into time.*

John writes about “in the beginning”—before time existed, before time began, before the creation of the world as we know it, and before God came into the world in the person of Jesus.

John links **“once before time”** with a time when God came out of eternity into our world of time and space. **He came from outside time into time.** John’s Christmas story summarizes that story as a cosmic upheaval.

Imagine John taking his historical video camera and panning back from the details, so that he can give us the big picture—the universal stage setting of the Christmas story. John’s Christmas story tells us the birth of Jesus was a cosmic upheaval, an earthquake-like revolution in the status quo of our world and its religion.

## **A RELIGIOUS LEADER SEEKS JESUS AT NIGHT**

Spiritual light was a fundamental cosmic change brought about by the birth of Jesus. *In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*—John 1:4-5

Physical light is central to the modern celebration of Christmas, a fundamental ingredient in the way we celebrate and decorate.

Light introduces change—when spiritual light comes into a dark place, humans who enjoy spiritual darkness, and find darkness comfortable and to their liking do not welcome change. Therefore, by and large, humans then and now for that matter, resist the Light of Jesus Christ.

*The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.*—John 1:9-10

In the third chapter of John we read the story of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a religious teacher of the Jews who came to Jesus at night (John 3:1-2). Nicodemus came to Jesus, the Light of the world, in the literal nighttime, in physical darkness,

in large part because he lived in spiritual darkness.

As a religious leader Nicodemus full well knew that his world of religion resisted Jesus, and thus it was only at night Nicodemus felt he might be unseen and undetected by those who knew him and who would frown on him consulting with Jesus.

The first part of the discussion Jesus had with Nicodemus hinged on spiritual rebirth. Jesus explained the difference between being born of the flesh and born of the spirit (John 3:3-8).

Jesus told Nicodemus that he could not be born into the kingdom of God—he could not “see” (light is central to physical and spiritual vision) the kingdom unless he experienced spiritual rebirth and transformation.

Jesus introduced the kingdom

***“The true light that gives light to everyone  
was coming into the world.”***

of God to Nicodemus as a spiritual dimension God gives humans, by his grace. The kingdom, which is one and the same as the idea we often speak of as heaven, comes from above.

That is, the kingdom of God does not come from a physical place or source—the kingdom of God comes from a spiritual, eternal source which is outside of the world of time and space in which we live.

If one is spiritually reborn, if one is born of the Spirit—if one is spiritually transformed—then one is “in heaven”—one can then “see” heaven.

When we are in spiritual

darkness we see when the Light illuminates us (John 3:3). “Seeing” the kingdom of God is another way of speaking of being spiritually reborn, of being born of the Spirit.

## **WHEN THE LIGHT OF HEAVEN CAME INTO OUR DARKNESS**

Humanly speaking, we think of “going” to heaven—we think of our goal as “getting to heaven.” We think of ascending to heaven.

But Jesus says that heaven, in his own person, descended and “came down” to us. When Jesus was born the perfection of God’s eternity of grace invaded the imperfections of our fleshly world. Heaven came to be with us, in the person of Jesus. Jesus brought the kingdom of God to us, from above.

The birth of Jesus begins “once

before time” and it means that the eternity of heaven, which transcends time and space, has come into our world.

Think of the way Jesus’ birth is most often depicted. The image that normally comes to mind is a well-cared-for newborn baby laying in a manger, being loved and adored. This is not by any means the real story, and it romanticizes Jesus’ birth into a big fluffy cloud of sentimental mush. In this way, the birth of Jesus becomes a “once upon a time” story instead of a ***once before time and once into time*** story.

Baby Jesus was lying in a

manger in a barnyard because Joseph and Mary found no room in the inn. Darkness then, and now, wants no part of the Light of this world.

We can only speculate as to why no room was found inside for a pregnant woman, because the Bible doesn't provide dogmatic details in this regard. But we can say that such a situation was deplorable—why wasn't a woman about to give birth given accommodation?

Yes, Jesus, the Light of this world, was loved by Joseph and Mary, and yes, the Wise Men brought him gifts. But we have to add some other elements to the reality of what really happened

When Herod heard that a king was going to be born, someone Herod considered to be a pretender to his own throne, Herod ordered the murder of all the boy babies in Bethlehem.

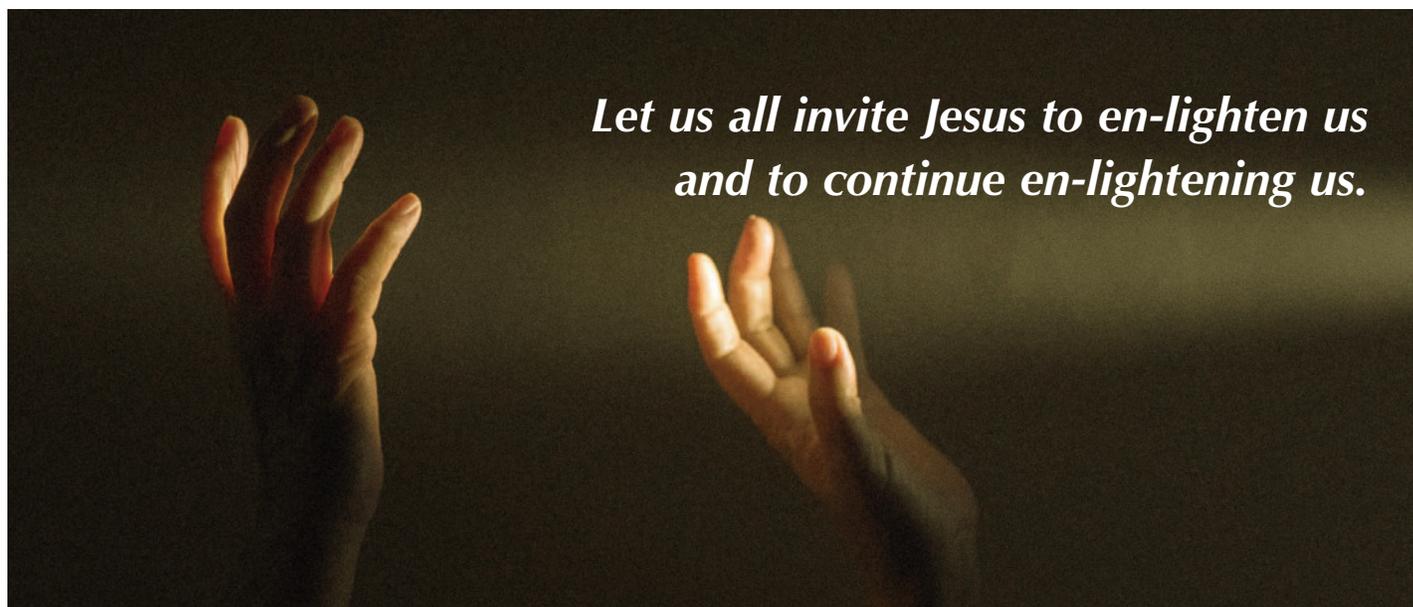
To make sure he killed this pretender to his throne, Herod ordered the murder of all boy babies two years and under not only in Bethlehem, but in the greater vicinity.

This *violent rejection* by religious leaders continued when Jesus grew up and finally started to preach. And of course, religious authorities who did not welcome his Light and rejected the change he represented, finally had Jesus killed.

world resists Jesus—and that same resistance can affect you and me.

Sadly, when some preach Jesus today it's as if they have repackaged him, selling him as if he were a new car or a widescreen television. Some say that Jesus is somewhat like Prozac—they say that Jesus was a self-help teacher, a motivational speaker who wanted people to live their best life now.

The darkness of our world rejected Jesus then—and it still resists him now. We don't naturally yield to the revolutionary Light of Jesus that transforms us, spiritually re-birthing us into the kingdom of God.



*Let us all invite Jesus to en-lighten us  
and to continue en-lightening us.*

when Light came into the darkness of our world, and they are not all rosy and sweet and wonderful.

There was obviously a *lack of hospitality*. That's why they were in the barnyard. Jesus, Joseph and Mary are not welcomed with open arms. Beyond that, from the beginning, the darkness responded to the Light of Christ by trying to extinguish him.

But Jesus, the spiritual outcast, cast out of the synagogue, despised and rejected—is not the theme of Christmas cards that celebrate his birth.

Generally speaking, we find *resistance to Jesus* in every part of our dark and corrupt world. We find resistance to Jesus in every part of our society—from government to education to religion. The darkness of our

How might Jesus want you and me to change—right now? Here's the question for you and me: Will we invite Jesus to begin to change or continue changing our lives this Christmas? Let us all invite Jesus to *en-lighten* us and *continue en-lightening* us. □

*Greg Albrecht is editor-in-chief of CWRm and president of Plain Truth Ministries.*

# Awaiting Arrivals

Laura Urista



*For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. —Isaiah 9:6*

**A**dvent is a time of expectation, anticipation and waiting. Ancient Israel **awaited the arrival** of a Savior—the Messiah to establish his kingdom of peace. The Magi **awaited the arrival** of a magnificent star to guide them to the newborn king. Mary **awaited the arrival** of her son, whom she named Jesus (Savior). Every year at Christmastime, we **await the arrival** of friends and family at dinners and celebrations.

## ARRIVAL DATE: DECEMBER 2020

Last year at Christmastime our family **awaited a special arrival**—our second grandchild. She was due on December 22 and “Pops” and I drove to our son’s home (six hours away) a few days early. We hoped to spend a little time with the family before the baby was born. I planned to stay and babysit four-year-old Heather while our son, Tim, and daughter-

in-law, Cristina, were at the hospital. I would also be there to help with household duties when the new baby arrived. As Christmas Eve approached, Cristina’s contractions got stronger and closer together and we **awaited** the baby’s **arrival** at any time.

But Christmas Eve came and went...and no baby. Christmas Day came and went...still no baby. Another day went by...and still no baby. At that point Cristina’s doctor decided to induce labor. “Pops” had to drive home that morning, truly disappointed that he wasn’t able to see our new granddaughter yet. He would have to wait another week till he drove back to pick me up. I stayed with Heather and we had a wonderful day playing with her new Christmas presents, while her parents were at the hospital—undoubtedly having a lot less fun than Heather and I!

As evening rolled around and it was time for bed, Heather couldn’t understand why her parents and new baby sister weren’t home yet. “*Why are Mommy and Daddy still gone? I need them!*” poor little Heather said, with tears streaming down her face. She simply could not be consoled.

They say “patience is a virtue.” Patience is also a gift of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22, NLT). It can be difficult for us to wait, and even harder to understand why we have to wait. Sometimes it feels like God is far away and we don’t understand why he isn’t “right here, right now” fixing everything

for us. We may think, “*Why is God still gone? I need him!*” But he is always here with us, every moment of every day. We can trust in his promise, “*I will never leave you nor forsake you*” (Hebrews 13:5, NKJV).

Finally, after I read Heather several of her favorite books and sang a few lullabies, she drifted off to sleep. About an hour later, I was awakened by a text from Tim saying baby Megan had been born, and everyone was doing fine.

## ARRIVAL DATE: ETERNITY

As I thanked God for the safe arrival of our precious baby Megan, I was reminded of the “**long-awaited arrival**” of another baby. The One who came to bring his eternal kingdom of peace, love and freedom to all the world. While we observe Jesus’ first **arrival** as an infant every Christmas, the world still **awaits** his eternal kingdom of peace in its fullness. But for Christ-followers, his kingdom **arrives** anew for each of us every day—as he reigns in our hearts and lives. His birth was foretold by prophets and announced in the lyrics of this classic hymn by Charles Wesley:

*Come Thou long-expected Jesus,  
born to set Thy people free.*

*From our fears and sins release us;  
let us find our rest in Thee.*

May we celebrate our Savior’s **arrival** and find our rest in him this Christmas, and always. □

*Laura Urista is managing editor of CWRm and Plain Truth magazine.*

# The Inalienable Rights of the Incarnation

Kenneth Tanner

This idea that humans are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights is beautiful, and that humans alone in all of creation bear the image of God is a mystery beyond description, but that God is human—this is nothing less than a revolution in human existence.

We often despise ourselves, our bodies, our limitations, our weaknesses. Humans are good at hating other humans, at loathing ourselves.

In the face of every human and demonic rejection of the image of God in human flesh, God sides with humanity against all that hates us, even our own hatred of ourselves, and becomes one of us (Bonhoeffer).

God becomes what he loves from all eternity. God becomes what they in the beginning of time made very good.

And God becomes not just one of us but a helpless, speechless, fragile baby born without privilege to a working family, a family under a cloud because of the circumstances of his conception, who when he was very little became refugees from political tyranny.

He assumes the one human nature all humans share. He is not a special brand of human but merely human. His purpose is to lend all of us—we who have fallen from the community of Love, we who have descended into hell and the grave, we who are infected with death—his divine permanence.

What it is to be human is now forever bound up in what it is for one particular human to be God. And our common humanity can never again sink lower than the throne in which he sits, still bearing the flesh Mary gave him. □

*Kenneth Tanner is pastor of Church of the Holy Redeemer in Rochester Hills, MI.*

## THE GOD-MAN

by Jim Fowler

At the heart of Christian thought is the understanding that Jesus was, and is, the God-man. Early in Christian theological thought, the Greek word *theoanthropos* was used to describe how deity and humanity were combined in the person of Jesus Christ. The word is a Greek compound; *theos* = God, *anthropos* = *man*.

The assertion of Jesus Christ as the God-man has been the core of Christian thought throughout the centuries of the Church. There have been aberrations wherein some emphasized the humanity of Jesus to the neglect of his deity, and others have emphasized his deity to the neglect of his humanity. They must be held together—JESUS was, and is, fully God and fully man.

In remembering the advent and birth of Jesus Christ at the Christmas holiday, we are recalling the historical incarnation of the Savior of mankind embodied in an individual person. “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), in John’s words.

Paul explained, “Although He existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, being made in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:6-7).

*Excerpted from The Issue Is Jesus by Jim Fowler.*



## Jesus Christ Before His Birth

**BRAD JERSAK**

**I**s it proper to say that the Word was not Jesus Christ until His birth? This is a crucial and difficult question. We need to think from an eternal perspective rather than human timelines. When we speak of the Triune God, it is as toddlers with blunt crayons trying to capture mysteries above any human paygrade. But let's give it a go.

First, there is no end of theological landmines when dealing with Christology. The early church puzzled over Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" for centuries. They discovered that unless we follow John's insistence that "Jesus IS the Christ," we inevitably compromise either Jesus' deity, his humanity or his unity as one Person. The trick to staying on track is to *always start with the One Person, our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Second, the One Person we start with is always Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. We don't start with a "pre-incarnate Christ" who is not Jesus Christ and then becomes "Jesus," as if his life were just one episode in the life of the eternal Word. This is to see things from a temporal standpoint as if words like "before" or "until" could apply to the eternal Word.

Yes, from a human perspective, you can imagine Abraham saying, "Jesus is not yet born." But from Jesus Christ's perspective, "Before Abraham was, I AM." So, Christ does not come from "before." He comes from "above" and "above" is still a metaphor—"above" is not a "place" but indicates that there has never been a "time" *in eternity* when Christ was divisible from Jesus *in time*.

This is why the apostles would even say that *Jesus Christ* is the Creator of all things.

This is why Revelation speaks of "the Lamb *slain from the foundation* of the world."

This is why Paul calls *Jesus Christ* the image of God, in whose divine-human image Adam was created! Along very similar lines, theologian and teacher John Behr puts it this way:

*Creation came through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Not through the "preincarnate Word" who later becomes Jesus Christ. That's mythology.

Just to put it in a very precise nutshell, just stop and think about this historic confession: "Jesus Christ was born outside of time from the Father, inside of time from the mother."

We tend to want to make it quasi-temporal—"the Word was born from the Father and *then, later on*, born from Mary."

Rather, this is our fundamental confession: **Jesus Christ IS God the Word and Jesus Christ IS become man.**

So we always START with the crucified and risen One. That's our entry point into God the Son and in fact, the very nature of God. Let's boil all of this down to one statement, derived from John 1:

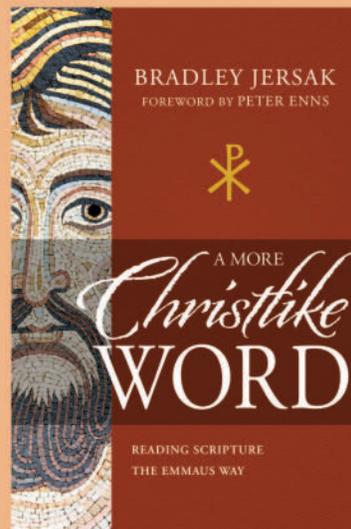
**God's One and Only Lamb,  
crucified and risen—**

**this Word who speaks all into being,  
this Light who shines on all and in all,  
this Life who breathes life into all,  
this One unveils God as**

**Our All-merciful, All-embracing Abba.**

For this reason, I would not distinguish Jesus from the Christ. Those who do tend to unwittingly undermine the necessity, reality, and eternity of the Incarnation. Always start with Jesus Christ, then say whatever we need to about his deity or humanity, remembering the two are indivisible in the mystery of this one glorious Person. □

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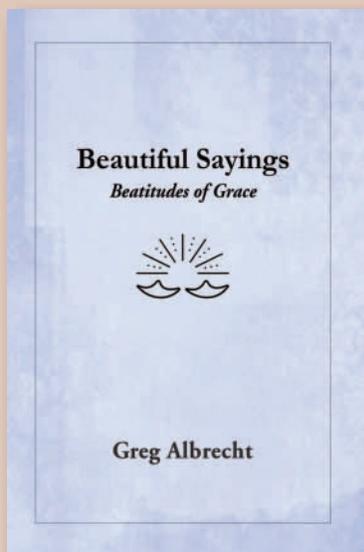
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