

ALTAR  
TO  
AN  
UNKNOWN  
LOVE

ROB BELL, C.S. LEWIS, AND THE LEGACY  
OF THE ART AND THOUGHT  
OF MAN

MICHAEL JOHN BEASLEY

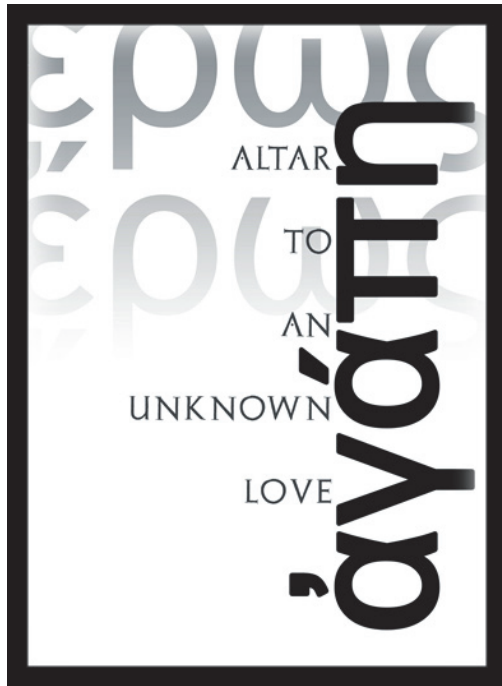
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*of the Art and Thought*

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***Dedication***

*To the memory of Martyn Lloyd-Jones*

*and all of Christ's faithful watchmen*

*of every generation*

*Ezekiel 33:7-9*

*And to my beloved wife Sandra*

*for her precious support, encouragement,*

*and love.*

*Deuteronomy 29:29:*

*"The secret things belong*

*to the Lord our God,*

*but the things revealed*

*belong to us and to our sons forever,*

*that we may observe*

*all the words*

*of this law."*

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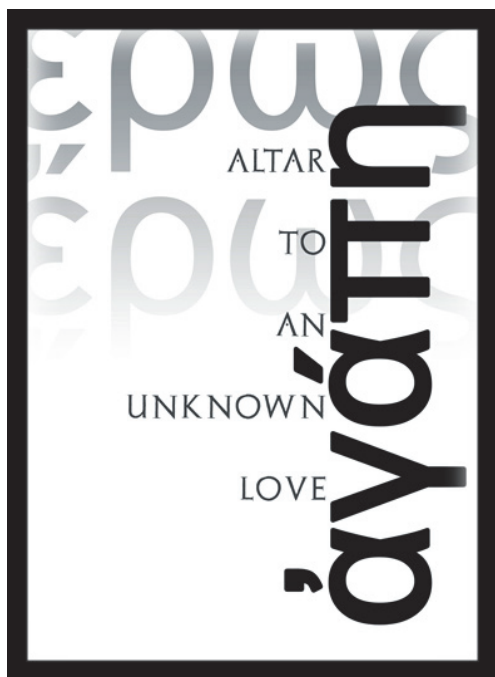
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INTRODUCTION

***"...love demands freedom."<sup>1</sup>***

***- Love Wins by Rob Bell***

On February 22nd, 2011, an online video was published advertising the book entitled, *Love Wins*, by controversial author and pastor: Rob Bell. As a result of this brief video, a firestorm of criticisms and summary judgments was broadcasted throughout the internet, even before the book was officially released. The pre-judgment deluge poured out by nearly all of Bell's critics rendered the conclusion that he had become a Universalist. Then, several pre-publication reviews began to enter the scene and, as the book's visibility continued to explode, Bell's publisher chose to advance the release date of the book from March 29th to March 15th. As more information about the book began to roll in, I became suspicious and wondered just how different his convictions might be from that of C.S. Lewis. Knowing something about the Emergent Church's affinity for writers like Lewis, I held on to my suspicions until I had a chance to read the book for myself. Much to my surprise, I was able to acquire a copy of *Love Wins* just a handful of days prior to its official release.

I consumed it that afternoon and was utterly disgusted.

Now the primary source of my disgust may not be what you think. On the one hand, Bell's treatment of the subjects of love, Heaven, and Hell was indeed disturbing on several fronts - the details of which are examined in the fourth chapter and

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins - A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person who Ever Lived* (HarperOne - An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2011), p. 114.

appendix of this book. However, the controversy surrounding Bell's book was especially troubling. The premature rush to judgment over what he had written effectively sidelined some very important issues. In the end, it is my contention that Bell is not a Universalist, *strictly speaking*, but that he does espouse a confused teaching that strongly reflects the views of C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald. The great oddity of the Bell controversy is this: nearly all of the loudest and most popular critics of Bell also happen to be some of the strongest advocates for C.S. Lewis and his writings. When I completed Bell's book, my disdain for what he wrote was eclipsed by the bizarre treatment he received from many within the Evangelical community, especially in view of this yet unanswered question:

If Bell is worthy of such a stern rebuke, *then why not C.S. Lewis?*

This question is, in a sense, foundational to this book. For years now, I have had to respond to a number of prevailing influences brought about by the theology of C.S. Lewis and, therefore, the entire Bell fiasco was not a great surprise for me. Why it is that Lewis is so highly regarded in modern Evangelicalism is somewhat of an enigma. Even J. I. Packer addressed the enigma of Lewis' public appeal in his *Christianity Today* article entitled, *Still Surprised by Lewis*, September 7th, 1998:

"The number of Christians whom Lewis's writings have helped, one way and another, is enormous. Since his death in 1963, sales of his books have risen to 2 million a year, and a recently polled cross section of ct [Christianity Today] readers rated him the most influential writer in their lives—which is odd, for they and I identify ourselves as evangelicals, and Lewis did no such thing. He did not

attend an evangelical place of worship nor fraternize with evangelical organizations."<sup>2</sup>

In his article Packer praises Lewis' literary achievements and influences, "gratefully" acknowledging his debt to the "Oxford don." However, his praise is strangely offset by the following admission:

"By ordinary evangelical standards, his idea about the Atonement (archetypal penitence, rather than penal substitution), and his failure ever to mention justification by faith when speaking of the forgiveness of sins, and his apparent hospitality to baptismal regeneration, and his noninerrantist view of biblical inspiration, plus his quiet affirmation of purgatory<sup>3</sup> and of the possible final salvation of some who have left this world as nonbelievers, were weaknesses; they led the late, great Martyn Lloyd-Jones, for whom evangelical orthodoxy was mandatory, to doubt whether Lewis was a Christian at all. His closest friends were Anglo-Catholics or Roman Catholics;<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> J.I. Packer, Still Surprised by Lewis: Why This Nonevangelical Oxford Don Has Become Our Patron Saint, (Christianity Today Online, September 7th, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> When speaking of his belief in Purgatory, he envisioned the purification process as follows: "I assume that the process of purification will normally involve suffering. Partly from tradition; partly because most real good that has been done me in this life has involved it. But I don't think suffering is the purpose of the purgation. I can well believe that people neither much worse nor much better than I will suffer less than I or more. 'No nonsense about merit.' The treatment given will be the one required, whether it hurts little or much. My favourite image on this matter comes from the dentist's chair. I hope that when the tooth of life is drawn and I am 'coming round,' a voice will say, 'Rinse your mouth out with this.' This will be Purgatory. The rinsing may take longer than I can now imagine." Lewis, C.S. (2002). *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (p. 108). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis reveals his syncretistic perspective concerning Roman Catholic dogma: "There are three things that spread the Christ-life to us: baptism, belief, and that mysterious action which different Christians call by different names-Holy Communion, the Mass, the Lord's Supper." C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, (HarperOne, New York, NY, 2000), p., 61.

his parish church, where he worshiped regularly, was 'high'; he went to confession; he was, in fact, anchored in the (small-c) 'catholic' stream of Anglican thought, which some (not all) regard as central. Yet evangelicals love his books and profit from them hugely."<sup>5</sup>

The influence of Lewis is subtle, yet systemic. It is my contention that his emphasis on fantasy, his weakness in doctrine,<sup>6</sup> combined with his stunning popularity, has produced a host of problems for the modern church. Despite this, many continue to rely heavily on Lewis for solid doctrinal substance. In the case of Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins*, his one recommended source for the subject of Hell is Lewis' own book, *The Great Divorce*. Bell's citation of this work is very revealing, especially when one considers Lewis' concluding remarks in his preface to *The Great Divorce*:

"I beg readers to remember that this is a fantasy. It has of course - or I intended it to have - a moral. But the transmortal conditions are solely an imaginative supposal: they are not even a guess or a speculation at what may actually await us. *The last thing I wish is to arouse factual curiosity about the details of the after-world.*"<sup>7</sup>

Though Lewis here supplies an appearance of timidity regarding the "details of the after-world," his true beliefs belie

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<sup>5</sup> Packer, *Surprised by Lewis*, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> This point is admitted by Lewis himself in various works of his: "...the questions which divide Christians from one another often involve points of high Theology or even of ecclesiastical history, which ought never to be treated except by real experts. I should have been out of my depth in such waters: more in need of help myself than able to help others." Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. viii.

<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Macmillan Publishing Co., Copyright 1946, New York, 1976 - Nineteenth Printing) pp., 7-8, italics mine.

this, as evidenced in his subjectively based convictions on Purgatory:

*"I believe in Purgatory.* Mind you, the Reformers had good reasons for throwing doubt on the Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory as that Romish doctrine had then become. I don't mean merely the commercial scandal. If you turn from Dante's Purgatorio to the sixteenth century you will be appalled by the degradation. In Thomas More's Supplication of Souls Purgatory is simply temporary Hell. In it the souls are tormented by devils, whose presence is 'more horrible and grievous to us than is the pain itself...' The right view returns magnificently in Newman's Dream.<sup>8</sup> ...Religion has reclaimed Purgatory. *Our souls demand Purgatory, don't they?*"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis' view of such a purgatorial reconciliation is indeed reflective of Cardinal Newman's *Dream of Gerontius*: "There let me be, and there in hope the lone night-watches keep, told out for me. There, motionless and happy in my pain, lone, not forlorn, - There will I sing my sad perpetual strain, until the morn. There will I sing, and soothe my stricken breast, which ne'er can cease to throb, and pine and languish, till possess of its Sole Peace. There will I sing my absent Lord and Love: - Take me away, that sooner I may rise, and go above, and see Him in the truth of everlasting day." Cardinal Newman's *Dream of Gerontius* (New York: Schwartz, Kirwin, & Fauss, 1916), p. 31. Such an influence of the doctrine of Purgatory came early in Lewis' life. When he was only fifteen, he wrote to his father, mentioning his reading of Newman's *Dream of Gerontius*, saying that it was "strongly written." Walter Hooper, ed., *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis: Family Letters 1905-1931*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2004), p. 65-66.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, C.S. (2002). *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (p. 108). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Kindle Edition, italics mine. Lewis also mentions his belief in Purgatory in his popular work, *Mere Christianity*. When speaking of God's salvific pursuit of men, he says the following: "Whatever suffering it may cost you in your earthly life, *whatever inconceivable purification it may cost you after death*, whatever it costs Me, I will never rest, nor let you rest, until you are literally perfect...As a great Christian writer (George MacDonald) pointed out, every father is pleased at the baby's first attempt to walk: no father would be

Lewis' convictions often flow from the well of his subjective desires, yielding a complex maze of personal thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and philosophies; oftentimes leaving the reader with more questions than answers. This methodology frequently gives him the freedom to publish his *theological musings*, beneath the deep influence of George MacDonald,<sup>10</sup> without offering many clear conclusions. A didactic procedure such as this gives him a form of protection from precise criticism; after all, it is difficult to hit a moving target. In essence, this largely reflects what Rob Bell does in *Love Wins*.<sup>11</sup> Both Lewis and Bell excel in such a pedagogy consisting of theological suggestions, inductive uncertainty, imaginative supposals, all interspersed with *some* dogma. With Bell, such a methodology is readily admitted in his book, *Love Wins*:

"The ancient sages said the words of the sacred text were black letters on a white page - there's all that white space, waiting to be filled with our responses and discussions and debates and opinions and longings and desires and wisdom and insights. We read the words, and then enter into the discussion that has been going on for thousands of years across cultures and continents."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the teachings of men like Lewis and Bell are rooted in precious little certitude, and precious little Scripture.

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satisfied with anything less than a firm, free, manly walk in a grown-up son." Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 202-203, italics mine.

<sup>10</sup> More is said about MacDonald's influence on Lewis in Chapter 1 of this book - *The Art and Thought of Man*.

<sup>11</sup> Bell draws very few theological conclusions in his book, *Love Wins*, however, Bell doesn't use fiction, instead he employs a series of questions and imaginative speculations in order to share his doctrinal musings. For a more detailed analysis of this, consult chapter 4 of this book, along with the appendix.

<sup>12</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, p. X (Preface).

Remarkably, *many* (not just Rob Bell) have employed Lewis' methods and writings in order to advance their own systems of theology. Moreover, there is a growing population of pastors and authors who lean heavily on Lewis' writings and have therefore continued to pass along this "Oxford don's" murky legacy. As it relates to the particular focus of this book, I would suggest to the reader that much of what is wrong with modern Christendom's treatment of the subject of *God's love* is attributable, in part, to the influences of both Lewis and his chief mentor - George MacDonald. I would also submit to the reader that Bell's book, *Love Wins*, is the veritable *canary in the coalmine* - *yet few have noticed the warning-sign of its demise*. What we *should* learn from such a warning-sign is that Lewis' legacy is quietly dangerous, and yet in God's providence the Bell controversy has sounded a loud and needful alarm exposing this lurking problem within Christendom. Because of this, those who have openly promoted C.S. Lewis, while openly criticizing Bell, should reconsider the consistency and integrity of their actions. Strangely, Bell's fawning devotion to Lewis is quite similar to that of some of his harshest critics, making the conflict of interest in this dispute rather bizarre. Those who aspire to be the watchmen of Christ's church are right to warn others about the teachings of Rob Bell; but they are wrong to ignore Lewis. In an absence of such warnings about Lewis, the church has been exposed to a number of compromised doctrines. This book will not attempt to cover them all, but this summary is offered to point out the broader scope of concerns surrounding Lewis:

*1. Lewis had a strong deference towards fantasy and philosophical logic over Scripture.*

2. *He held to a purgatorial view of Hell which had the potential of reconciling sinners to God, postmortem.*

3. *He denied scriptural inerrancy.*

4. *He saw mankind as being innately good, and only partially depraved.*

5. *He held to a view of absolute human free will which clearly diminished God's freedom and sovereignty.*

6. *He had a view of the atonement that denied Christ's penal substitution.*

It is not uncommon, nor surprising, that many who consume Lewis' writings end up reproducing many of his beliefs as well, *and Rob Bell is just another example of this*. And while there are several concerns about Lewis' doctrine that we could address, I have chosen to expose what I believe is the most prominent subject that has fallen beneath his influence: *the love of God*. Lewis' influence upon Bell's notions of love, in *Love Wins*, is striking. Bell's confident and repeated mantra that *love demands freedom*, is reflective of Lewis' own teaching. Most who have criticized Bell have focused on his descriptions of Heaven and Hell, but for myself, his obfuscations of the nature of God are perhaps even more stunning. In fact, only a deeply polluted view of God's love and grace could generate such a statement as this:

*"[the better question is]...not 'Does God get what God wants?' but 'Do we get what we want?' And the answer to that is a resounding, affirming, sure, and positive yes. Yes, we get what we want. God is*

*that loving. If we want isolation, despair, and the right to be our own god, God graciously grants us that option.*"<sup>13</sup>

Really? *Hell is a gift of God's grace*? No serious student of Scripture would be able to read such a statement and remain indifferent. The violence done by Bell to the doctrine of Hell is bad enough, but what he does to the nature of God's love, in *Love Wins*, is simply astronomical. Bell's utter departure from biblical reasoning is breathtaking, and leads him into territories of thought that are disturbing. Clearly, his exaltation of human freedom is quite telling. The fact that he heralds the question of *human freedom over God's sovereign freedom* is deeply reflective of his admitted mentor. I am convinced that the entire Rob Bell controversy has provided a watershed moment and opportunity for the Christian community to give pause and reconsider the impact that C.S. Lewis has had and continues to have on the broader realm of Christendom. In addition, even though Rob Bell is mentioned here and elsewhere in the book, I should remind the reader that he will not be our focus. Instead, the focus of our study will be the collective forces that helped to produce Bell's *seemingly innovative* views of love and free will. Principally, we will examine the direct influences of C.S. Lewis, along with the indirect influences of George MacDonald, on contemporary understandings of the nature of God's love. More specifically, we will consider how Lewis' faulty notions of love and free will yield the bad fruit of *subjectivism*. In doing so, it is my ultimate desire to warn the reader about these toxic influences. There is, in a sense, a *perceived novelty* that comes with the theologies of MacDonald, Lewis, and Bell; but doctrinal novelty should stand as a warning sign against the

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<sup>13</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, p. 117.

standards of God's ancient truth. J.C. Ryle was right when he warned his own generation concerning mankind's *natural desire* for philosophical novelty:

"There is an Athenian<sup>14</sup> love of novelty abroad, and a morbid distaste for anything old and regular, and in the beaten path of our forefathers. Thousands will crowd to hear a new voice and a new doctrine, without considering for a moment whether what they hear is true.--There is an incessant craving after any teaching which is sensational, and exciting, and rousing to the feelings.--There is an unhealthy appetite for a sort of spasmodic and hysterical Christianity. The religious life of many is little better than spiritual dram-drinking, and the 'meek and quiet spirit; which St. Peter commends is clean forgotten (1 Peter 3:4.). Crowds, and crying, and hot rooms, and high-flown singing, and an incessant rousing of the emotions, are the only things which many care for.--Inability to distinguish differences in doctrine is spreading far and wide, and so long as the preacher is 'clever' and 'earnest,' hundreds seem to think it must be all right, and call you dreadfully 'narrow and uncharitable' if you hint that he is unsound!...All this is sad, very sad. But if, in addition to this, the true-hearted advocates of increased holiness are going to fall out by the way and misunderstand one another, it will be sadder still. We shall indeed be in evil plight."<sup>15</sup>

Ryle's counsel is quite sound, and should be given serious consideration. There is a great danger that comes when we embrace teachers for their popularity *above any other serious consideration*. Yes, C.S. Lewis is popular, but we must remember that truth is not ratified by the acclaim of men -

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<sup>14</sup> Ryle's mention of *Athenian love of novelty* refers to what is described in Acts 17 - a subject which will be addressed in greater detail in chapter 1 of this book.

<sup>15</sup> J.C. Ryle, Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, & Roots, (Charles Nolan Publishers, Moscow Idaho, 2001), p. XXIX.

*popularity in this fallen world is not necessarily a compliment.* My task here is to sound a warning to others in the wake of all that the Rob Bell controversy has uncovered. It was the Apostle Paul who understood such a duty of warning others as a faithful watchman.<sup>16</sup> Had he failed in any way to cleanse Christ's bride with the waters of God's Word; had he flinched from his duty of declaring the profitable doctrines of Scripture; had he refused to sound a warning in the face of the onslaught of error, then he would never have been able to say:

Acts 20:26-27: 26. "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27. "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God."

In order for us to maintain such integrity as that of the Apostle Paul, we must consider our need for Holy Writ above any other presumed "wisdom." Therefore, in the next section, we will seek out and acquire some necessary study-tools that will help us navigate our way throughout the remainder of this book. As we examine Lewis' treatment of the subjects of God's love and human freedom, we will encounter an admixture of needed warnings and exhortations. However, our ultimate focus will be on God's profitable Scriptures, over and above the errors of Bell, Lewis, and MacDonald. By the Lord's sufficient provision, let us be better versed in the former rather than the latter.

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<sup>16</sup> In Acts 18:6 and 20:26, Paul stated that he was clear of any bloodguilt which God would require of any watchman who failed to warn the people of pending danger: Ezekiel 33:6: "But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet and the people are not warned, and a sword comes and takes a person from them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require from the watchman's hand."