



BOOK REVIEW *by* Ann Childress, M.A.R.

HEAVEN IS FOR REAL

A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back

by

Todd Burpo with Lynn Vincent

In recent years there have been a flurry of books and stories of people who briefly died and allegedly went to heaven or hell and then came back to life. *Heaven is for Real* is such a story. As of February 8, 2012 it has been on the New York Times non-fiction best seller list for sixty-three weeks. Colton Burpo, the three year old son of a Wesleyan church pastor, had emergency surgery for a burst appendix. “For three minutes” during the surgery, he supposedly either died unbeknownst to the doctors operating on him or visited heaven without dying. A few months later, at four, he begins telling his *Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*. His story is added to and embellished over a period of two and a half years with the final revelation of his visit (at least at the time of the publication of this book) coming a few months before he turned seven.

A quick read of the back of the book and the table of contents shows that this book concerns extra-biblical (new) revelations on the topic of heaven and future prophecy about “The Coming War.” At this point, there is enough information for a Christian to question whether or not to proceed with reading the book.

Extra-biblical revelations and prophecies are problems because they deny both the completeness and the sufficiency of Scripture. It is *only* “all Scripture” that has the claim of being “inspired by God,” that is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16)¹. With the coming of Jesus and His apostles, the day of God speaking “to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways” ceased (Heb 1:1-2, 2:2-4). While we acknowledge the Holy Spirit’s ongoing illumination of Scriptural truth, we deny new, extra-Biblical revelations and prophecies. Because our Bible is the inspired Word of God, the church has received it as such, and it has come to us sufficient and complete.

Not only are new revelations and prophecies to be denied by Christians, but there are serious biblical warnings neither to add to nor to subtract from God’s Word. The last book of the Law,

¹ All Scripture is from the NASB95 unless otherwise noted.

Deuteronomy 4:2 says, “*You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it...*” (Deut 4:2a). The last book of the Bible, Revelation 22:18-19 says, “*I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.*” God no longer gives new revelations, what He has given is now inscripturated (WCF, 1.1, 1.2, 1.6).

Simply from reading the back cover blurb and the table of contents, we have found enough information to make a decision to bypass reading *Heaven is for Real*.

However, for the sake of doing a book review, we’ll go further. In the opening tributes, “Praise for *Heaven is for Real*,” there is a red blinking light in the form of a forthright claim by Jo Anne Lyon, General Superintendent, of the Wesleyan Church that this book deserves canonical status, which of course, all true inspired revelation of God does indeed deserve. (A canon is a rule or standard and the canon we normally speak of is the completed Bible.) What slippery footing this places us on! If *Heaven is for Real*, a three year old’s *Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*, were to contain extra-biblical, canonical material, what other books from the past two thousand years might also be canonical? What other new mysteries might God reveal to us in the twenty-first century and through whom? Who decides which revelation is from God and which is not? Is it the Roman Catholics? Is it the Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, or Wesleyans? Where does it end and who are we to believe or trust? Ms. Lyon’s recommendation is another good reason to go no further, but, we will.

Even though the back cover tells of Colton’s *new* revelations of heaven, the claim for *Heaven is for Real* is that those revelations “matched the Bible exactly.” Of course, that would make the book unnecessary as we already have the Bible. But, that was not the point (nor should we be that logical). Apparently, the point was to reassure us that Colton is authenticating the truth of Scripture. But, “*The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God*” (WCF, 1.4). Because Scripture is the inspired Word of God it is the self authenticating Word of God. While personal testimonies about God’s work and use of His Word in the lives of others are encouraging, they cannot and do not authenticate the Word of God. In other words, being emotionally moved to believe the Word of God because a three year old tells us he went to heaven, saw things never mentioned in the Bible, and knows heaven is real is problematic to say the least. God has told us heaven is true and has given us as much detail as we need in His Word,

and He has sealed His people with the Holy Spirit so that we can believe and understand that Word (1 Cor 2:12-13).

Of utmost importance is the fact that Colton's extra-biblical revelations of heaven do *not* match the Bible exactly by any means (although his father gives many Scriptures trying to make them parallel). Colton's revelations not only *add* many things about heaven that the Bible never reveals, but at one or (perhaps) two points contradict Scripture. Keep in mind that while some of these are silly, that does not lessen the offense against the sufficiency and completeness of Scripture. Colton's revelations include (but are not limited to):

- Jesus has a rainbow colored horse. (His father notes that there are horses and rainbows in the Bible, so this must be true.)
- *Before* Christ's Second Coming and the bodily resurrection, people have physical bodies in heaven. (If this is the correct understanding of Colton's revelation, this is a *contradiction* of revelation. Indeed, Jesus is in heaven in His resurrected body, but before His body was resurrected, He yielded up His spirit and His spirit went to heaven as His body was laid in the tomb, Matt. 27:50, Luke 22:43. When we die, our spirits go to heaven, but our physical bodies are buried awaiting Christ's Second Coming, at that moment our bodies will be resurrected and glorified, 1 Cor. 15:20-26, 35-49; Rev. 6:9-10.)
- All people in heaven are either in their late twenties or early thirties (as his father notes, just like Jesus when he died) or they are children. Everyone (except Jesus) has wings of differing sizes, halos, and sashes of differing colors.
- It is Gabriel who is sitting on the throne to God's left.
- Colton saw God on His really big throne and God is really big. (In heaven, we will behold God, but God is spirit. *How* did Colton see God? Interestingly, while his pastor father presses him about Jesus' appearance for years, he never mentions pressing or even asking him about God's appearance. This is either another contradiction of Scripture or it comes perilously close.)
- Colton watched the Holy Spirit shooting down power to his father when his father was preaching at church. (And this occurred during the three minutes of Colton's visit to heaven when his father was at the hospital?)

- “The angels carry swords so they can keep Satan out of heaven.” (What of Christ Jesus’ defeat of Satan? What about God’s allowance of Satan’s approach to His throne in Job? Is the only reason we’ll have no reason to fear Satan and his hordes in heaven attributed to angels?)
- Jesus wouldn’t let Colton have a sword in heaven as he would “be too dangerous.” (Assumably, this would only be true if people had physical bodies in heaven.)
- Jesus looks exactly like the painting of him done by Akiane Kramarik when she was eight years old. (This could so easily lead to idolatry, not something God encourages.)
- *After* Roman Catholics asked about Mary, Colton reassuringly gave details about her and her still motherly relationship with Jesus.

In chapter twenty-six, Colton, as he was then approaching his seventh birthday, moves from giving extra-biblical revelations about heaven to a prophecy about a future war which he observed. He saw his father fighting men, monsters, and dragons with bow and arrows or sword. Not addressing the problems of eschatology in this, again, the heart of the problem lies in the fact that after the closing of the canon of Scripture, God’s special revelation and prophecies have ceased and we are most seriously prohibited from adding to it or subtracting from it. In the light of this offense (and in the light of the fact that small children overhear a lot of things), the couple of supposedly inexplicable happenings during his trip to heaven fall into the irrelevant category.

There is another problem with this book, and that is while God has limited our knowledge of heaven to what He has revealed to us in His Word, our expectations of heaven should be limitless. When caught up to the third heaven, Paul said, “*And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak*” (2 Cor. 12:3-4, bold mine). Paul’s and John’s (in Revelation) reports of heaven allow for our spirits to soar to the joy that awaits us in the inexpressible glories of beholding our triune God and being set free from sin forever.

The Westminster Confession of Faith’s closing section *Of the Holy Scripture* says: “*The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits [private revelations, Modern English Study Version], are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture*” (WCF, 1.10). The doctrines and revelations of *Heaven is for Real* do not hold up to the Bible or this doctrinal standard. The aim

of this book is to add new and conflicting revelation and prophecy beyond those found in Holy Scripture. This popular Christian non-fiction [*sic* (so it is called)] bestseller might intrigue, but it is to be rejected and avoided by Christians. Indeed heaven is for real, but this book is not.

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