

The Burpo-Malarkey Doctrine

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by Phil Johnson

It's odd and troubling that the best-selling evangelical book of the past decade is a fanciful account of heaven spun from the imagination of a four-year-old boy. (Believe it or not, *The Purpose-Driven Life* and *The Prayer of Jabez* are both now more than a decade old.) Peddling fiction about the afterlife as non-fiction is the current Next Big Thing in the world of evangelical publishing.

Heaven is for Real, by Todd Burpo, tells the story of Burpo's son, Colton, who says he visited heaven while anesthetized for an appendectomy at age 4. Colton, now 13, says in heaven he got a halo and real wings (though they were too small for his liking). He also claims he sat on Jesus' lap while the angels sang to him; he saw Mary standing beside Jesus' throne; and he met the Holy Spirit (who, according to Colton, is "kind of blue").

More than seven million copies of this book are now in circulation, and the publisher has been assembling a sizable catalogue of spin-off products, including a planned movie version (to be produced by televangelist/prosperity preacher T. D. Jakes).

That book is not to be confused with ***The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven***, by Kevin Malarkey—another runaway best-seller. Malarkey's book is about his son Alex, who at age 6 was nearly killed (and left permanently paralyzed) in a devastating automobile accident. In the immediate aftermath, and then during his rehabilitation, Alex says he made multiple trips to heaven and back.

The Malarkeys' version of heaven is considerably darker and not as full of details as the Burpos'. "There is a hole in outer Heaven," Alex says. "That hole goes to hell." The devil evidently uses this portal freely, because he is a major figure in Alex Malarkey's description of paradise. Alex says he has personally seen Satan many times, first at the accident scene and then later in heaven.

Indeed, this is perhaps the most vivid part of Alex Malarkey's whole account: "The devil's mouth is funny looking, with only a few moldy teeth. And I've never noticed any ears. His body has a human form, with two bony arms and two bony legs. He has no flesh on his body, only some moldy stuff. His robes are torn and dirty. I don't know about the color of the skin or robes—it's all just too scary to concentrate on these things!"

Those books are part of a burgeoning genre, currently one of the hottest trends in publishing: imaginative tales purporting to be eyewitness accounts of heaven and the afterlife. (Blogger Tim

Challies has labeled the genre "Heaven Tourism," candidly dismissing one bestseller in the category as "pure junk, fiction in the guise of biography, paganism in the guise of Christianity.")

Examples of these works include *My Journey to Heaven: What I Saw and How It Changed My Life*, by Marvin J. Besteman; *Flight to Heaven: A Plane Crash . . . A Lone Survivor . . . A Journey to Heaven—and Back*, by Dale Black; *To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again: A True Story*, by Mary Neal; *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death and Life*, by Don Piper; *Nine Days In Heaven*, by Dennis Prince; *23 Minutes In Hell: One Man's Story About What He Saw, Heard, and Felt in that Place of Torment*, by Bill Wiese; and many others. Several of these titles have appeared on various bestseller lists, and most of them are still riding high.

This is not a totally new phenomenon. Various survivors of near-death experiences have been publishing gnostic insights about the afterlife for at least two decades. Betty Eadie's *Embraced by the Light* was number one on the *New York Times* Bestseller List exactly 20 years ago. The success of that book unleashed an onslaught of similar tales, nearly all of them with strong New Age and occult overtones. So psychics and new-agers have been making hay with stories like these for at least two decades.

What's different about the current crop of afterlife testimonies is that they are being eagerly sought and relentlessly cranked out by evangelical publishers. They are bought and devoured by millions who would describe themselves as born-again Bible-believing Christians. Every book I have named in the above list comes from an ostensibly evangelical source. Many of them are old-guard mainstream ECPA publishers, not vanity presses or dilettantes from the charismatic fringe.

These books are coming out with such frequency that it is virtually impossible to read and review them all. But that shouldn't even be necessary. No true evangelical ought to be tempted to give such tales any credence whatsoever, no matter how popular they become. One major, obvious problem is that these books don't even agree with one another. They give contradictory descriptions of heaven and thus cannot possibly have any cumulative long-term effect other than the sowing of confusion and doubt.

But the larger issue is one no authentic believer should miss: *the whole premise behind every one of these books is contrary to everything **Scripture** teaches about heaven.*

In an upcoming book dealing with this subject, John MacArthur says,

For anyone who truly believes the biblical record, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that these modern testimonies—with their relentless self-focus and the relatively scant attention they pay to the glory of God—are *simply untrue*. They are either figments of the human imagination (dreams, hallucinations, false memories, fantasies, and in the worst cases, deliberate lies), or else they are

products of demonic deception. We know this with absolute certainty, because Scripture definitively says that people do not go to heaven and come back: "Who has ascended to heaven and come down?" (Proverbs 30:4). Answer: "*No one* has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (John 3:13, emphasis added). All the accounts of heaven in Scripture are visions, not journeys taken by dead people. And even visions of heaven are very, very rare in Scripture. You can count them all on one hand.

Only four authors in all the Bible were blessed with visions of heaven and wrote about what they saw: the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, and the apostles Paul and John. Two other biblical figures—Micaiah and Stephen—got glimpses of heaven, but what they saw is merely mentioned, not described (2 Chronicles 18:18; Acts 7:55). As Pastor MacArthur points out, all of these were prophetic *visions*, not near-death experiences. Not one person raised from the dead in the Old or New Testaments ever recorded for us what he or she experienced in heaven. That includes Lazarus, who spent four days in the grave.

Paul was caught up into heaven in an experience so vivid he said he didn't know whether he went there bodily or not, but he saw things that are unlawful to utter, so he gave no details. He covered the whole incident in just three verses (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).

All three biblical writers who saw heaven and described their visions give comparatively sparse details, but they agree perfectly (Isaiah 6:1-4; Ezekiel 1 and 10; Revelation 4-6). They *don't* agree with the Burpo-Malarkey version of heaven. Both their intonation and the details they highlight are markedly different. The biblical authors are all fixated on God's glory, which defines heaven and illuminates everything there. They are overwhelmed, chagrined, petrified, and put to silence by the sheer majesty of God's holiness. Notably missing from all the biblical accounts are the frivolous features and juvenile attractions that seem to dominate every account of heaven currently on the bestseller lists.

Every week, I answer e-mails and inquiries from evangelicals who are confused by the barrage of afterlife travelogues. Why Christians who profess to believe the Bible would find these stories the least bit compelling is an utter mystery, but it is a sure sign that many in the evangelical *movement* have abandoned their evangelical *convictions*. Specifically, they have relinquished the principle of *sola Scriptura* and lost their confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture. Why else would they turn from clear biblical teaching on heaven and seek an alternative view in mystical experiences that bear no resemblance to what Scripture tells us?

This trend away from biblical authority was even noted earlier this week by a secular reporter in *The New York Post*. Consider the implications of this quotation:

Lynn Vincent, who ghost-wrote "Heaven is for Real" on behalf of the young boy Colton Burpo and his father, said that she was initially reluctant to include Colton's description of people in heaven having wings. "If I put that people in Heaven have wings, orthodox Christians are going to think that the book

is a hoax." She did and they didn't.

Evangelical readers' discernment skills are at an all-time low, and that is why books like these proliferate. Despite the high profile, high sales figures, and high dollar amounts Christian publishers can milk from a trend such as this, it doesn't bode well for the future of Christian publishing—or for the future of the evangelical movement.

Watch for an all-new edition of John MacArthur's classic book *The Glory of Heaven* coming from Crossway next spring. The book will include thorough critiques of *Heaven Is for Real* and *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven*, plus extended evaluations of a few other bestsellers in the same vein. More importantly, it gives a thorough exposition of what Scripture teaches about heaven.

Spoiler alert: Heaven's a lot more glorious than any of these current bestsellers suggest.

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