

When Preschoolers Speak Ex Cathedra

Scripture: Deuteronomy 29:29; 1 Corinthians 4:6

Code: B140501

The typical Christian today seems oblivious to the principles established by Deuteronomy 29:29 and 1 Corinthians 4:6 (“that you may learn . . . not to go beyond what is written” ESV). In fact, people seem to be looking for spiritual truth, messages from God, and insight into the spirit world everywhere *but* Scripture.

Today’s evangelicals have been indoctrinated by decades of charismatic influence to think God regularly bypasses His written Word in order to speak directly to any and every believer—as if extrabiblical revelation were a standard feature of ordinary Christian experience. Many therefore think charity requires them to receive claims of “fresh revelation” with a kind of pious gullibility. After all, who are we to question someone else’s private word from God?

So when dozens of best-selling authors who profess to be Christians are suddenly claiming they have seen heaven and want to tell us what it’s like, most of the Christian community is defenseless in the wake of the onslaught.

Todd Burpo’s astonishing multimillion best seller, *Heaven Is for Real*, [1]Todd Burpo with Lynn Vincent, *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy’s Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* (Nashville: Nelson, 2010). epitomizes the phenomenal success Christian authors and publishers have had with books about alleged visits to heaven. It also illustrates the danger of basing one’s ideas about the afterlife on personal experience rather than Scripture alone.

Most of the familiar features of the genre are included in Burpo’s story: conscious out-of-body travel, the ability to see things from an ethereal perspective, visions of angelic beings, sublime emotions, vivid lights and colors, and lots of unexpected but finely detailed trivia about heaven’s look and feel. But *Heaven Is for Real* also includes dozens of biblical references throughout. The entire story is carefully clothed in familiar evangelical language and imagery. And Burpo has clearly succeeded in selling a near-death-experience story to evangelicals as if it were a legitimate source of knowledge about heaven. Drove of Christian readers have heartily embraced his book.

Todd Burpo is the bivocational pastor of a quasi-Pentecostal Wesleyan church in a remote southwestern Nebraska farm community. He is culturally, if not doctrinally, evangelical—a fairly typical middle-American small-town pastor. In his own words, he is “one of those pastors who walks back and forth during the sermon. Not a holy-rolling, fire-and-brimstone guy by any stretch, but not a soft-spoken minister in vestments, performing liturgical readings either. I’m a storyteller, and to tell stories I need to move around some” (*Heaven Is for Real*, p. 10).

So Burpo is comfortably familiar with evangelical culture and expectations. He says he believes in the authority of Scripture, and he attempts to draw as many connections as possible between his story and what the Bible says about heaven, angels, and the spiritual realm. That’s why so many of the details he gives are carefully set alongside biblical allusions and proof texts. In that respect at

least, *Heaven Is for Real* certainly includes more references from the Bible than most in the genre.

What sets the book apart, however, is that it is based on the experience of a not-quite-four-year-old boy. It is the story of Pastor Burpo's eldest son, Colton, who as a toddler nearly died from a burst appendix. Four months after the medical crisis, when Todd's wife, Sonja, asked little Colton if he remembered being in the hospital, he answered, "Yes, Mommy, I remember. . . . That's where the angels sang to me" (p. xiii).

Todd Burpo's response to that comment was breathless amazement. In fact, the level of awe and stupefaction he describes seems quite out of proportion to the significance of such a statement from a typical four-year-old. He writes, "Time froze. Sonja and I looked at each other, passing a silent message: *Did he just say what I think he said?*" (p. xiv). As Pastor Burpo himself recounts the story, he was easily, immediately, and utterly convinced that Colton had indeed had some kind of out-of-body experience:

Colton said that he "went up out of" his body, that he had spoken with angels, and had sat in Jesus' lap. And the way we knew he wasn't making it up was that he was able to tell us what we were doing in another part of the hospital: "You were in a little room by yourself praying, and Mommy was in a different room and she was praying and talking on the phone." (p. 61)

That same unhesitating credulity sets the tone for the entire book. Showing little understanding of how fertile the imagination of a barely four-year-old boy can be, Pastor Burpo embraced Colton's testimony with implicit faith. He instantly decided to subjugate his whole understanding of heaven to little Colton's instruction. "If he had really seen Jesus and the angels, I wanted to become the student, not the teacher!" (p. 62).

Many of the things Todd Burpo interprets as irrefutable proof that his son was given special revelation are clearly little more than standard Sunday school stories with a typical preschooler's slightly distorted slant. Pastor Burpo recounts this conversation that took place shortly after Colton began talking about heaven:

"Did anything else happen?"

He nodded, eyes bright. "Did you know that Jesus has a cousin? Jesus told me his cousin baptized him."

"Yes, you're right," I said. "The Bible says Jesus' cousin's name is John." Mentally, I scolded myself: *Don't offer information. Just let him talk . . .*

"I don't remember his name," Colton said happily, "but he was really nice."

John the Baptist is "nice"?!

Just as I was processing the implications of my son's statement—that he had *met* John the Baptist—Colton spied a plastic horse among his toys and held it up for me to look at.

"Hey, Dad, did you know Jesus has a horse?"

“A horse?”

“Yeah, a rainbow horse. I got to pet him.” (p. 63)

Pastor Burpo seems to think Colton’s perspective on John the Baptist and heavenly rainbow horses is full of profound insight. In reality, precocious preschoolers make imaginative remarks that sound like authoritative observations all the time. Art Linkletter made a career of eliciting unintentionally witty commentary on profound matters from kids on live daily television.

Remember, Colton had lived his entire life in a pastor’s home, overhearing conversations, listening to stories, and being exposed to teaching focused on biblical themes. At one point, Pastor Burpo acknowledges that he had read countless Bible stories from picture books to Colton (p. 66). And yet when Colton mentions in passing that “Jesus has markers” (meaning, evidently, the nail prints in his hands and feet), Todd Burpo’s breathless response is, “*He saw this. He had to have*” (p. 65–67).

And thus the book continues. When Colton says something farfetched, heterodox, or unbiblical, Todd Burpo finds a way to accept it as true just the same. At one point, for example, Colton says he was sitting in a little chair next to the Spirit of God. So Todd asks his son what the Holy Spirit looks like:

“Hmm,” Colton replies. “That’s kind of a hard one . . . he’s kind of blue.” (p. 103)

Obviously, a remark like that begs for a follow-up question or some kind of explanation. “Blue”? Does Colton envision the Holy Spirit as Papa Smurf? Is he describing a bluish cloud of haze? *Blue*? What is he talking about?

At first, Todd seems to be pondering similar questions. (“I was trying to picture that. . . .”) But Colton immediately changes the subject, and no further explanation is ever given. The only hint we get about what is in Colton’s mind comes more than twenty pages later, when he tells his father that Jesus “shoots down power” from heaven while Todd Burpo is preaching. This time Todd presses for an explanation: “What’s the power like?”

“It’s the Holy Spirit” (p. 126). Evidently Colton envisions the Holy Spirit as being like the electrical discharge from a Tesla coil, and he pictures Jesus with the ability to fire blue lightning bolts of power from His fingers directly into preachers.

Todd Burpo is dumbfounded: “If there were comic-strip thought-bubbles over people’s heads, mine would’ve been filled with question marks and exclamation points right then.” Clearly, however, Todd is already a firm believer in Colton’s vision of heaven. Recollecting that he had always said a prayer for God’s help every time he preached, he writes, “To imagine God answering it by ‘shooting down power’ . . . well, it was just incredible” (p. 126).

The questions Todd Burpo asks his son betray a strange fixation on the physical appearance of things. Todd’s peculiar inquiry about what the Holy Spirit “looks like” is by no means the only example of this. When four-year-old Colton first began to talk about seeing people in heaven, Todd immediately began pressing for visual descriptions. He writes, “All I could think to ask was: ‘So what did the kids look like? What do people look like in heaven?’” (p. 72). Later, when Colton informed his dad that he saw the devil in heaven, Pastor Burpo’s first question was, “What did he look like?” (p.

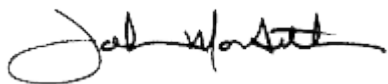
134). And of course, Todd Burpo persistently asked his son questions about the physical appearance of Christ, too.

Most of the details Todd Burpo recounts about Colton's near-death experience came to light months after Colton's release from the hospital, and even then the story did not spill forth unprompted in a coherent account. Fragments and anecdotes arose here and there over a long period of time—usually in response to tenacious parental questioning. Thus new details were unearthed from Colton's memory on a fairly regular basis for years. In every case, without fail, Pastor Burpo concludes that Colton's knowledge of the afterlife could not have been gained through any means other than firsthand experience, and therefore he is easily convinced his son's account of heaven is fully reliable, accurate, and authoritative.

In a pithy review of the book, Tim Challies observed this motif:

Every one of Colton's experiences, or very nearly every one, follows a pattern. He tells his father some little detail. His father experiences a gasp or feels his heart skip a beat. "I could hardly breathe. My mind was reeling. My head was spinning." A Scripture verse comes to dad's mind that validates the experience. Colton gets bored and runs off. Repeat.[2]Tim Challies, "Heaven Is For Real," blogpost March 28, 2011, at <http://www.challies.com/book-reviews/heaven-is-for-real>.

If you needed to remember a recipe for dinner, an accurate record of your phone messages, or trustworthy driving directions, perhaps the *last* place you'd turn is the foggy memory of a small child. And yet many believers consider that a reliable and even authoritative source of revelation about God and His heavenly kingdom. What can explain this illogical departure from the authority and sufficiency of Scripture? We'll consider the answer next time, as we look at the idolatry of experience.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joel Burpo". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a stylized "B".

(Adapted from [The Glory of Heaven](#).)

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