

The Idolatry of Experience

Scripture: Romans 10:17

Code: B140502

The inclusion of Bible references throughout *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). may convince superficial readers that Pastor Burpo has painstakingly compared his son's account to Scripture and judged it accurate on that basis. But to those who take the time to look up the citations and analyze them in context with any degree of discernment, it will be clear that Todd Burpo's facile method of proof-texting betrays a lack of any serious engagement with Scripture. He has failed to test everything carefully as we are instructed and encouraged to do (1 Thessalonians 5:21; Acts 17:11).

Amazingly, Todd Burpo himself admits that he rarely "tested Colton's memories against what the Bible says." (*Heaven Is for Real* p. 101). In the one instance where he mentions testing Colton, he declares, on the thinnest possible evidence, that Colton "passed [the biblical test] without batting an eye."

What was the biblical issue at stake on that occasion? Todd was asking his son if he had ever seen God's throne. He first needed to explain to the boy what a "throne" is. ("I picked up the Bible storybook and pointed . . .")

"Oh, yeah!" Colton replied. "I saw that a bunch of times!"

Todd, in keeping with the tone he maintains throughout the book, was utterly agog: "My heart sped up a little. Was I really going to get a glimpse into the throne room of heaven?"

Colton continued: "And do you know that Jesus sits right next to God? . . . Jesus' chair is right next to his Dad's!" (p. 100).

Pastor Burpo's response again emphasizes his avid credulity (not to mention his cluelessness about the kind of images a four-year-old raised on illustrated Bible stories might have in his mind): "That blew me away. There's no way a four-year-old knows that. It was another one of those moments when I thought, *He had to have seen this*" (p. 100–101).

One of the most troubling aspects of *Heaven Is for Real* is the way Todd Burpo constantly insinuates that personal experiences—even the spectral memories of a three-year-old boy under anesthetics—are somehow more compelling than Scripture alone. "I had been a Christian since childhood and a pastor for half my life, so I believed that before. But now I *knew* it" (p. 84). Colton's experiential exegesis of heaven has clearly made a far more profound impact on Todd (and has been more formative to his notion of the afterlife) than anything he had previously gleaned about heaven from his own study of Scripture.

That way of thinking is diametrically opposed to what the Bible says about faith, experience, and the authority of Scripture. In fact, the most important defense Christians have against self-deception is a conviction that the written Word of God is more certain and more authoritative than *anyone's* experience. Scripture teaches this explicitly and repeatedly.

For example, writing about his experience on the mount of transfiguration—an undeniable miracle at which other eyewitnesses were present—the apostle Peter says: “We did not follow cleverly devised myths. . . . We ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven” (2 Peter 1:16, 18 ESV). It was a stunning, unprecedented, up-close look at the glory of heaven—literally. Peter goes on to say, however, that the written Word of God is even more reliable than an experience of that caliber! “We have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention” (v. 19 ESV).

Authentic faith “comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17 ESV)—not from mystical experiences, and certainly not from blindly trusting a child’s account of a mystical experience. That kind of naive conviction is not true faith at all; it has more in common with dangerous self-confidence.

Nevertheless, Pastor Burpo clearly believes that somehow little Colton’s experience has bolstered his family’s faith in a way Scripture could never do. “I love the way my mom sums it up,” Todd writes, and then he quotes his mother’s words, which stand (except for a brief epilogue) as the book’s closing sentence: “I accepted the idea of heaven before, but now I visualize it. Before, I’d heard, but now I know that someday I’m going to see” (p.150).

I’ve given this prolonged critique of *Heaven Is for Real* not because it is the worst of the genre, but because of all the books in this category, it is the most likely to be read and deemed harmless by the typical evangelical. It is *not* harmless. It denigrates the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. It confounds faith with superstition. It subtly elevates human experience to a higher level than the Word of God. It purports to reveal things about God and the heavenly realm that are not taught in Scripture. And it repeatedly insinuates that the testimony of someone who has been mystically enlightened can be a more effective stimulant to faith than Scripture alone.

While *Heaven is for Real* has been the focal point of our discussion, the theological problems and dangers it presents are not limited to its pages alone. This is just one example of a large and growing subgenre of afterlife travelogues popular today—a genre that includes at least two mega-best-selling titles from evangelical publishers. The authors of these stories—and evidently millions of readers as well—regard these testimonies as authoritative, reliable, and full of superior insights that can take readers to a higher level of understanding and enlightenment beyond what we can get from the Bible. In other words, all of these books take a similarly protognostic stance on heaven and the afterlife. All of them are dangerous and misleading. That includes the ones that seem fairly benign as well as the ones that are clearly steeped in occult superstition. All of them stand as reminders to us that Scripture and Scripture alone is the only safe place for Christians to learn anything about the immortality of human souls, what happens to a person after death, what heaven is like, what awaits the unrighteous in hell, and what we can expect in the judgment to come.

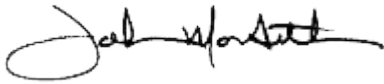
That is the point I want to stress at the close of this series. It is the principle of *sola Scriptura*. That Latin expression means “Scripture alone.” It is a shorthand expression that signifies the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. It means that Scripture is the sole rule of faith and practice for Christians—so that no duty, no teaching, and no belief that lacks a biblical foundation is ever to be deemed binding

on any Christian.

To put it another way, the principle of *sola Scriptura* starts and ends with a recognition of the Bible's superiority over every other source of knowledge, truth claim, religious tradition, and supposed new revelation.

This principle was one of the fundamental pillars of biblical Christianity recovered by the early Reformers. It had fallen into neglect and denial, as sound, biblical doctrine had been crowded out of mainstream church life by false teaching, medieval superstition, ecclesiastical corruption, and a host of problems all related to the visible church's failure to submit to the authority of Scripture. The current evangelical fascination with near-death experiences (and with other extrabiblical sources of alleged spiritual enlightenment) is pointing backward to the same kind of apostasy.

Clearly, if we believe Scripture is the Word of God, we must reject every anecdotal account that contradicts or goes beyond what Scripture teaches. We must also refuse to get caught up in every kind of speculation, every truth claim, and every supposed new revelation that detracts from or leads people away from simple reliance on the Word of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur".

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

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