

The Three-Year-Old Accidental Tourist in Heaven

A Critique of *Heaven is for Real* by Todd Burpo and Lynn Vincent

By Nollie Malabuyo • August 2012

What would rather strengthen your belief in heaven: a toddler's testimony, or the canonical Scriptures?

Another passing fad hit the American evangelical world last year, and it's now hitting the Philippines. Here's another indication that mysticism, gnosticism, superstition, idolatry, and gullibility is alive and well in evangelical mediocrity.

In the local missionary school, the big hysteria concerns a book about a preschool zombie boy who came back from the dead. In *Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* written by Todd Burpo and Lynn Vincent, three-year-old Colton, the son of Todd, relates his "accidental tourist" experience in heaven as he was in surgery for a burst appendix.

As Gary Smith of [The Aquila Report](#) rightly observes, "America's focus on entertainment, and fear that heaven may be boring, has prompted depictions of paradise as the ultimate recreation center." According to Smith, this is evidenced in ideas such as:

Heaven is "Disney World, Hawaii, Paris, Rome, and New York all rolled into one... a pleasure palace, a fairyland ... and a never-ending vacation... It's the ultimate adventure for travelers of all ages." ~ Anthony DeStefano in *A Travel Guide to Heaven*

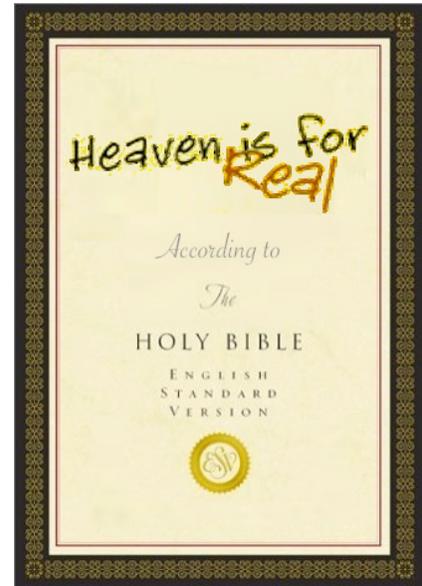
"God will supply us with everything we'll ever need" to be happy in heaven. ~ Billy Graham
Saints will have "the athleticism of Michael Jordan, the mind of Albert Einstein, and the creativity of Charles Dickens."

This book reflects the influence of major cultural trends on American views of heaven, especially increased anxiety, the prominence of our entertainment culture, the impact of the therapeutic worldview, and concerns about the breakdown of the family and the impoverishment of personal relationships...

This has led Christians to offer competing pictures of heaven as a place of comfort, enriching entertainment, self-actualization, robust relationships, and bliss. Heaven has been depicted as a haven from the world's ills, a magnificent home, a posh vacation resort, a perpetual playground, a therapeutic center, and a place of incredible happiness.

Smith has noted well that this is another American phenomenon, seen in its #130 ranking in Amazon.com US, but only #799 in Amazon.com UK.

Like Rob Bell's *Love Wins*, this book is worthless so I'm not wasting my money and time reading it. I'm basing this opinion on reviews by theologians whom I trust and are much more knowledgeable than myself. For example, [Ann Childress's review](#) says,



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*... 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.

A truly “astounding” claim is made by Jo Anne Lyon, General Superintendent of the Wesleyan Church of which Todd Burpo is a pastor: “Colton’s story could have been in the New Testament – but God has chosen to speak to us in this twenty-first century through the unblemished eyes of a child, revealing some of the mysteries of heaven.” According to Lyon, this book deserves canonical status, on par with the Law of Moses, the Writings, the Prophets, the Gospels, the Epistles of Paul, and the other writings of the Apostles. Astounding indeed!

[Tim Challies](#) meanwhile says, “So reject this book. Do not read it. Do not believe it. And do not feel guilty doing so.”

Why so down on this New York Times bestseller? The three main reasons are:

1. **It’s Unbiblical**
2. **It’s Unbiblical**
3. **It’s Unbiblical**

Okay, to be more specific, here they are.

1. Most of the stories are new, extra-biblical and unbiblical revelations. The Bible tells us that the canon is closed because it is the authoritative, sufficient, inerrant, infallible, inspired Word of God. We are not to add to nor take away anything from it, lest God add plagues or “*take away [our] share in the tree of life*” ([Deut 4:2](#); [Rev 22:18-19](#)). Childress lists some silly, even comical visions that are both extra-biblical and unbiblical:

- 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. ([T]his is a contradiction of revelation... When we die, our spirits go to heaven, but our physical bodies are buried awaiting Christ’s Second Coming...)
- 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?)
- 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. NM: Also, is injuring or killing others still a possibility 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. NM: This not only will "lead to idolatry"; it is idolatry.)
- After Roman Catholics asked about Mary, Colton reassuringly gave details about her and her still motherly relationship with Jesus. (NM: This belies Jesus' statement that there is no marriage or families in heaven.)
- A prophecy about a future war which he observed. He saw his father fighting men, monsters, and dragons with bow and arrows or sword. (NM: A literal reading of the apocalyptic of Revelation is seriously problematic.)

2. There were at least eight people in the Bible who were raised from the dead, and none of them revealed anything about heaven.

3. Only three saints have come back from heaven: Moses, Elijah, and Paul, and none of them said anything about heaven. Paul only said this about his experience, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" ([2 Cor 12:2-4](#)).

4. Unbelievers will not be persuaded by someone coming from the dead with visions of heaven or hell. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man pled to Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them about torment in hell. But Abraham denied his request, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" ([Luke 16:19-31](#)).

5. There is only one physical death for the rest of us, and there are no second chances. [Hebrews 9:27](#): "And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment."

Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back has sold six million copies so far. But if there's a book called *Heaven is for Real According to the Bible*, will it sell like hotcakes like Burpo's? Sad to say, no. It will be on clearance sale very quickly, because it will not tickle itching ears.