



Heaven Is For Real

by Todd Burpo
with Lynn Vincent

A Critical Theological Review:

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Don Piper¹ got it started with his book *90 Minutes in Heaven* which has sold more than 4 million copies in over 22 languages since its publication in 2004.² Piper paved the way for the rapid embrace of seemingly credible accounts of trips to Heaven and back. Six years later, in 2010, Christians seemed even more willing to uncritically embrace yet another alleged vision of Heaven making *Heaven Is For Real*³ an almost instant best seller. According to available sales figures, *Heaven Is For Real* has sold more than 6 million copies after just two years on the shelf of your local Christian bookstore.

Why This Review:

For a long time I have ignored these authors and the books they write hoping that each title published would be the last. The increasing sales figures indicate that this is no passing fad. It appears that we can expect much more from this genre in the years to come.

The completely uncritical embrace by the Christian community of any storyteller who wanders by with an account of having visited Heaven is indicative of a lack of discernment among those who name the name of Christ. Sixty years ago, books like this would have never made it off the presses. Any decent publisher would have refused to print such banal nonsense and book stores would never have considered selling such tripe to unsuspecting patrons. Today, it's different.

Claiming to visit Heaven is big business! Just the book sales themselves are worth millions to both author and publisher. Sadly, it seems that nobody is willing to ask the simple question, "Is this true?"

Christians appear so desperate to have their theology

and faith validated by modern day experiences that they rush to sanction any account which offers authentication. This only serves to undermine the testimony of Scripture and to reveal their own lack of confidence in it.

The Christian church needs discernment. With the proliferation of questionable experiences, we need today, perhaps more than ever, to follow the apostles injunction to, "**examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good**" (1 Thessalonians 5:21) and to examine the Scriptures daily to see whether these things are so (Acts 17:11).

It is my hope that publishing critical theological reviews of two of the bestsellers⁴ will demonstrate some of the serious flaws and theological problems with these books. It is my hope that by exposing error, the hearts of God's people will be turned to the truth of Scripture and they may be equipped to discern the dangers of these alleged modern-day revelations.

Not-So-Critical Reviews

The endorsements inside the book's cover reveal the complete lack of discernment that plagues the modern Christian church.

Don Piper, author of *90 Minutes in Heaven*, tops the list with this unqualified recommendation:

You will be moved by the honest, simple, childlike accounts of a little boy who has been to heaven.⁵ It's compelling and convincing. It's a book you

1 No relation to John Piper of Desiring God Ministries.
2 Sales figure taken from <http://www.challies.com/articles/heaven-tourism>.
3 Todd Burpo, *Heaven Is For Real* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

4 See the Critical Theological Review of *90 Minutes In Heaven*, also available at kootenaichurch.org.
5 The reader may notice throughout this review that sometimes the word "Heaven" is capitalized and sometimes it is not. I prefer to capitalize the word since "Heaven" is a proper noun describing an actual place like Cleveland or Miami. However, Burpo does not capitalize it (according to conventional standards) so when quoting him, it will remain uncapitalized. The same can be said for personal pronouns referring to any Persons of the Trinity.

should read. If you're ready to go to heaven, this book will inspire you. If you're not ready for heaven, allow a little child to lead you. Like Colton says, *Heaven Is for Real*.⁶

It is interesting that Piper would endorse an account of a trip to Heaven which contains details that contradict his own. As a pastor, he should have the discernment necessary to identify some of the horrible false doctrines contained in Colton Burpo's account. Then again, if Piper is skeptical of Colton's account, how can he expect people to uncritically embrace his own? Piper can hardly criticize one account while promoting his own. After all, if God is in the business of offering tours of Heaven, how can we question anyone's claims without questioning everyone's claims?

Equally disturbing is the recommendation offered by Sheila Walsh, author and regular speaker for Women Of Faith Conferences:

Every now and again a manuscript comes across my desk where the title intrigues me. That's what happened with this particular book called **Heaven Is for Real**. I thought I'd just skimmed through it, but I couldn't put it down. I read it from cover to cover. I was so impacted by the story. It's a book that will not only make you love God more and fear death less, but it will help you understand that heaven is not a place where we just sit around for a thousand years singing Kumbaya; it's a place where we begin to live as we were always meant to live, before the fall. If heaven is something that intrigues you, or troubles you, if you wonder what our lives would be like, then I highly recommend this book.⁷

Sheila Walsh should know better. As a woman who leads and teaches other women, she should have been able to spot the heresies and un-biblical theology presented in this book. Walsh assumes that what is revealed in this book is a genuine revelation of what our lives will be like, a revelation of Heaven that is instructive for us today. She treats Colton's experience as if it were just as true, authoritative, and trustworthy as anything we might find in Scripture. In fact, she points us to this book and not Scripture to learn of Heaven. That is nothing short of tragic!

Among the many other recommendations for this book from senior pastors and presidents of seminaries, is this very telling statement,

"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. The writing is compelling and the truth astonishing, creating a hunger for more.⁸

This highlights one of the fundamental problems with these supposed modern-day visions of Heaven. If the reader accepts them as true, then they are in fact a twenty-first century revelation of Heaven equal in authority to that received by any writer of Scripture. This is an issue I will address a little later in this review.

Summary of the Book

March 2003 brought to the Burpo family a series of harrowing events centering around their then four-year-old son Colton. Colton, the youngest of their two children⁹, suffered from an undiagnosed ruptured appendix while on a family vacation. A series of misdiagnoses and mistreatments allowed his appendix to leak poison into his system for five days. By the time Colton's symptoms were correctly diagnosed, he was very near death.

It was after Colton's recovery that he began to reveal details of his experience as well as things which happened during his surgery, which caused his parents to conclude that Colton had visited Heaven as part of a Near Death Experience while on the operating table.

In "bits and pieces over a period of months and years," Colton began to reveal the details of his "extraordinary journey" (151).¹⁰ Colton's father Todd, the author of the book,¹¹ began a process of question asking and discovery as his son began to reveal the details of his trip to Heaven.

Todd Burpo is the pastor of Crossroads Wesleyan Church in Imperial, Nebraska.

8 Inside cover. This comes from a Jo Anne Lyon, General Superintendent of The Wesleyan Church.

9 Colton has one sister two years older than he and the Burpos had lost one child in a miscarriage before Colton was even born. This is a detail that Colton supposedly learned during his time in Heaven.

10 During the remainder of this review, I will cite the page numbers on which quotations and details are found in parentheses (xx).

11 The book is co-authored by Lynn Vincent who worked for eleven years as senior writer, then features editor at the national news biweekly WORLD Magazine. She is currently a lecturer in writing at the World Journalism Institute and at The King's College in New York City. Frankly, I would have expected more discernment from someone who wrote for WORLD Magazine for eleven years. I don't understand how someone who teaches journalism can accept this story with all its contradictions to Scripture so uncritically. It is unfortunate that someone who cannot even vet this story sufficiently would be teaching future journalists.

6 Inside cover. Emphasis in the original.

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The Process of Discovery

Four months after their harrowing experience in North Platte, Nebraska, the Burpo family, on another trip, was driving past the Great Plains Regional Medical Center where Colton had been treated. Jokingly, Todd Burpo reminded young Colton of the hospital, “Hey, Colton, if we turn here, we can go back to the hospital. Do you wanna go back to the hospital?” (xvii).

Colton answered, “No, Daddy, don't send me!”

Colton's mom Sonja asked, “Do you remember the hospital, Colton?”

“Yes, Mommy, I remember,” he said. “That's where the angels sang to me.”

When asked, “What did they sing to you?” Colton replied, “Well, they sang 'Jesus Loves Me' and 'Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho.' I asked them to sing, 'We Will, We Will Rock You,' but they wouldn't sing that” (xviii).

During that same conversation, Colton claimed that while in Heaven he sat on Jesus' lap. He then revealed what his parents were doing in the other room while the surgeon was working on him in the operating room. Colton said, “Yeah, at the hospital. When I was with Jesus, you were praying and Mommy was talking on the phone.”

Todd responded, “How could you know what we were doing?”

Colton claimed, “Cause I could see you. I went up out of my body and I was looking down and I could see the doctor working on my body. And I saw you and Mommy. You were in the little room by yourself, praying; and Mommy was in a different room, and she was praying and talking on the phone” (xx).

This was the Burpos's first clue that something extraordinary had happened to their son. From that point, Todd began to question Colton about his experiences to “get him to talking again” (62). He claims he was careful not to ask him leading questions. He didn't want to put any ideas into Colton's head. After all, as Todd says, “if he had really seen Jesus and the angels, I wanted to become the student, not the teacher” (62). How sad is this - a trained and commissioned pastor called to teach the Word making himself the student of a 4-year-old who makes unbiblical claims?

Through the book, Todd continues to relate the conversations he had with Colton, the questions he asked, and the revelations of Heaven that Colton disclosed. Todd even tried on occasion to trick Colton by misleading him with certain suggestions. Once, he suggested that it gets dark in

Heaven, only to have Colton correct him. This, Todd believes confirms that Colton really did see Heaven and spend time there.

At no point in the book does Todd question any detail, no matter how ridiculous, that is offered by his son. From the very beginning Todd postured himself as the student and his four-year-old boy as the teacher as he uncritically embraced every detail offered by Colton. Some of the claims are so absurd, unbiblical, and even heretical as to make even the most minimally discerning reader realize that whatever Colton saw, it was not Heaven. But that didn't stop Todd Burpo from lapping it all up without hesitation.

On a number of occasions, we find Todd taking in these silly sophomoric details while describing how he was overwhelmed by the profundity of his child's account. He had to take breaks from all his learning from Colton because, “I had enough information to chew on” (68). After being told that Jesus has a rainbow colored horse, Todd, not one to be the least bit skeptical, is overwhelmed by the account: “That set my head spinning” (63). On another occasion, Todd's response: “My mind reeled.” (66) This is characteristic of the uncritical acceptance given to every detail related by Colton, no matter how bizarre.

At a number of points, Todd, being a pastor, should have discerned that what he was being told by his son did not comport with the Biblical description of Heaven. He didn't.

It never seems to occur to him that there could be any explanation for the claims of his imaginative 4-year-old boy other than that he really did visit Heaven. He never entertains the possibility that Colton invented the details. He never considers that Colton might have been deceived. Todd Burpo took it all in without hesitation, question, criticism, or discernment and he apparently expects the reader of this book to do the same.

The Biblical and Theological Problems With Colton's Description of Heaven

Where other accounts are scarce on the actual details concerning their time in Heaven,¹² this book abounds with more than you want. The descriptions of Heaven are nothing like you would find in the book of Revelation. They are, however, exactly the type of details you would expect to be made up by an imaginative 4-year-old.

¹² Don Piper's book *90 Minutes In Heaven* spends only 15 of its 205 pages discussing his time in Heaven, and even those 15 pages offer scant detail. See the review at our website.

Claims About Heaven

According to Colton, there are lots of colors in Heaven, "That's where all the rainbow colors are." (63) When asked, "What did you do in heaven?", Colton responded, "Homework." Todd Burpo continues:

Homework? That wasn't what I was expecting. Choir practice, maybe, but homework? "What do you mean?"

Colton smiled, "Jesus was my teacher."

"Like school?"

Colton nodded. "Jesus gave me work to do, and that was my favorite part of heaven. There were lots of kids, Dad" (71-72).

We are supposed to believe that Jesus is busy teaching children in Heaven and assigning homework! These are the kinds of inane and immature details that litter the landscape of this book. This is not something we find in Scripture, but it is something we would expect a four-year-old to fabricate. Why do we not read of details like this in the lengthy and **inspired** account of the book of Revelation? Perhaps it is because Colton's description of Heaven does not fit reality.

When asked whether Colton saw any animals in Heaven, Todd writes, "The answer is yes! Besides Jesus' horse, he told us he saw dogs, birds, even a lion - and the lion was friendly, not fierce" (152).

Catholics are curious about Heaven as well.

"A lot of our Catholic friends have asked whether Colton saw Mary, the mother of Jesus. The answer to that is also yes. He saw Mary kneeling before the throne of God and at other times standing beside Jesus. 'She still loves him like a mom,' Colton said" (152-153).

Colton would only say this because he is too young and immature to understand that Mary, in Heaven, loves Christ, not like a mom, but like a sinner saved by grace.

Wings

After Colton revealed that "there were lots of kids" in Heaven, Todd Burpo writes, "But all I could think to ask was: 'So what did the kids look like? What do people look like in heaven?'"

"Everybody's got wings," Colton said.

Wings, huh?

"Did you have wings?" I asked.

"Yeah, but mine weren't very big." He looked a little glum when he said this.

"Okay . . . did you walk places or did you fly?"

"We flew. Well, all except for Jesus. He was the only one in heaven who didn't have wings. Jesus went up and down like an elevator." (72)

Todd Burpo then lamely tries to liken that juvenile description to the Ascension of Christ in **Acts 1**, as if the Ascension had anything at all to teach about Jesus' mode of movement in Heaven.

Colton then revealed, "Everyone kind of looks like angels in heaven, Dad. . . . All the people have a light above their head." (73)

Later, Colton described seeing his grandfather, Todd's father, whom he calls Pop. Todd asked, "Colton, what did Pop look like?"

"He broke into a big grin. 'Oh, Dad, Pop has really big wings!'" (87)

Of course, Scripture does not teach that those in Heaven have wings and need them to move. This should have caused skepticism in anyone with even a minimal level of discernment and knowledge of the Bible.

The ghost writer of this book, Lynn Vincent, was reluctant to include this detail expecting that it would be a sure signal to Bible-believing Christians that the Burpo account was fraudulent. She admits, "If I put that people in Heaven have wings, orthodox Christians are going to think that the book is a hoax."¹³ She included it in the account, and millions of undiscerning Christians swallowed it without question. She apparently thought far more highly of the discernment skills of Christians than is warranted.

This account contradicts another widely received account of a visit to Heaven written by Don Piper, *90 Minutes In Heaven*. In his book, Piper claims that he saw a crowd of people at Heaven's gate, all sent to welcome him, yet he doesn't mention that any of them had wings. According to Piper, he started walking toward Heaven's gate, not flying:

Strange as it seems, as brilliant as everything was, each time **I stepped forward**, the splendor increased. The farther **I walked**, the brighter the light. . . . A holy awe came over me as **I stepped forward**. I had no idea what lay ahead, but I sensed that with **each step I took**, it would grow more wondrous."¹⁴

In fact, Piper says that he felt that those who greeted him "wanted to **walk** beside me as I passed through the

13 http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/csi_afterlife_YLOGrr04p9zP8bShR9QuiN

14 Don Piper, *90 Minutes In Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revel, 2004), 28. Emphasis mine.

iridescent gate.”¹⁵

Remember, Piper endorses this book even though reports like this one undermine his own claims. Why does Piper not mention this detail? Does he concur with Burpo's claim that people in Heaven have wings and move by flying? If not, then why does he endorse something he knows to be false? If he does, then why does his own account offer different details? One of these persons is lying.

The Throne of God

Colton claims that he saw God's throne “a bunch of times” (100). He said Jesus was next to God's throne. When asked what side of the Father Jesus sat on, Colton confirmed it was the right side (101).

Todd writes,

Wow. Here was a rare case where I had tested Colton's memories against what the Bible says, and he passed without batting an eye. But now I had another question, one I didn't know the answer to, at least not an answer from the Bible.¹⁶

“Well, who sits on the other side of God's throne?” I said.

“Oh, that's easy, Dad. That's where the angel Gabriel is. He's really nice” (101).

Todd Burpo was asking for information about Heaven that he admitted was not to be found in Scripture. I wonder if we are to start writing some of this down as an appendix in our Bibles. We know Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father. We are told that by the inspired author of Hebrews. Now, equally authoritative I guess, we are to know that Gabriel sits at God's left hand.

Colton further claims that he got to sit down in God's throne room. Todd asked him, “Where did you sit, Colton?”

He replied,

“They brought in a little chair for me. . . I sat by God the Holy Spirit. . . I was sitting by God the Holy Spirit because I was praying for you. You needed

the Holy Spirit, so I prayed for you” (102).

Why would anyone who has read the descriptions of God's presence in Isaiah, Ezekiel, or Revelation give this even one moment's consideration? This is not the picture that the Bible paints for us. It is, however what we might expect from the fertile imagination of a four-year-old boy.

Claims about Jesus

During Colton's alleged visit to Heaven he claims that he got to see Jesus. In fact, Colton assured a dying man that “It's going to be okay. The first person you're going to see is Jesus”¹⁷ (119). Colton not only claims to have seen Jesus, but he has offered plenty of details about the Jesus he saw.

For instance, Colton says he sat on Jesus' lap (xix), Jesus has a horse that is rainbow colored, and Colton got to pet it (63). This horse must be a different one than the one John saw in his revelation of Heaven (**Rev. 6:2; 19:11, 14**). Colton relates that Jesus has a beard, His eyes are “pretty,” and Jesus wears a purple sash. In fact, He is the only one in Heaven who wears a purple sash (65). Jesus wears a crown with a diamond in the middle (65-66) and the wounds of the cross are still visible. Colton describes the wounds as red “markers” on Jesus.

Claims About the Holy Spirit

It is hard to select the most absurdly laughably and inane detail of the book, but Colton's description of the Holy Spirit would certainly rank in the top five.

Todd asked Colton, “What does God look like? God the Holy Spirit?”

“Colton furrowed his brow. 'Hmm, that's kind of a hard one. . . he's kind of blue” (103).

The Holy Spirit is blue? Blue? Is He a blue fog? A blue person? A blue cloud? Does He look like a smurf? You certainly won't find that in the Bible! And rather than allowing such silly, unbiblical ideas to cause him to question Colton's tale, Todd uncritically received it and tried to picture it in his

15 Ibid., 35. In spite of all his language which describes him as “stepping” in Heaven, Piper, when asked “How did you move? Did you walk? Did you float?” has to confess, “I don't know.” (35) One wonders how a 4-year-old was able to know this by observing wings while Piper was not.

16 The wording that Todd Burpo uses here is somewhat puzzling. In other places, he takes great pains to show that he was constantly testing Colton's experience, asking questions he could not possibly know the answer to without a first-hand experience of Heaven. Yet here he says that his testing of Colton was rare. Or did he mean that Colton answering correctly was rare. I'm not sure. I point it out merely in case the reader happened to have noticed the inconsistency.

17 The Bible does indeed teach that for the believer, to be absent from this body is to be present instantly with Jesus (**Phil. 1:21; 2 Cor. 5:8**). What is interesting about this detail is that it is a direct contradiction to Don Piper's account. If we take Piper's account as true, then it is possible to be in Heaven for 90 minutes and never see Jesus. From Piper's account we learn that the first people we meet in Heaven will be our departed friends and family who were instrumental in bringing us to faith or in our discipleship. According to Piper, we actually meet them outside of Heaven's gate. They are our welcoming committee sent to usher us into God's presence. Didn't Piper realize that by endorsing this book, he was endorsing an account that serves to undermine his own credibility? Apparently not.

mind.

Extra-Biblical Revelation

Nobody who believes that the Bible is completely sufficient for the believer would write a book like *Heaven is For Real*. The very premise of this book is to reveal things about Heaven that we **do not** or **cannot** learn from Scripture. Further, we are expected to take the word of a 4-year-old boy for this revelation. It should not surprise us to find out that Todd Burpo believes that God speaks outside of Scripture to His people to reveal His will for their lives.

Personal Direction

He writes,

Then Mom asked Colton an odd question. "Did Jesus say anything about your dad becoming a pastor?"

"Oh, yes! Jesus said he went to Daddy and told him he wanted Daddy to be a pastor and Daddy said yes, and Jesus was really happy." (90-91)

Todd then describes the night that this happened which he remembered so well. While thirteen, he attended a summer camp at John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. After one of the messages which encouraged the kids to pursue being pastors and missionaries, Todd says,

"I remember that the crowd of kids faded away and the reverend's voice receded into the background. I felt a pressure in my heart, almost a whisper: *That's you, Todd. That's what I want you to do.*

"There was no doubt in my mind that I had just heard from God" (91).

The teaching that God reveals His will apart from Scripture is a denial of *Sola Scriptura*. Todd Burpo believes that he received personalized, private revelation from God, **apart from Scripture**. It is no wonder he would believe that he could also receive revelation about Heaven and the future from a 4-year-old's visit to Heaven. This undermines the doctrine of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture.

The Future - Armageddon

Not only did Jesus reveal His will to Todd through personal revelation, but Jesus supposedly revealed the future to Todd through little Colton Burpo. Supposedly Colton got to witness the battle of Armageddon while in Heaven. He got a preview of events to come.

Colton said,

"Dad, did you know there's going to be a war?"

"What do you mean?" Were we still on the heaven topic? I wasn't sure.

"There's going to be a war, and it's going to destroy this world. Jesus and the angels and the good people are going to fight against Satan and the monsters and the bad people. I saw it. . . . In heaven, the women and the children got to stand back and watch. So I stood back and watched. . . . But the men, they had to fight. And Dad, I watched you. You have to fight too."

Todd needed clarification.

"You said we're fighting monsters?"

"Yeah," Colton said happily. "Like dragons and stuff."

"Um, Colton . . . what am I fighting the monsters with?" I was hoping for a tank, maybe, or a missile launcher. . . I didn't know, but something I could use to fight from a distance.

Colton looked at me and smiled. "You either get a sword or a bow and arrow, but I don't remember which."

Colton was describing the battle of Armageddon and saying I was going to fight in it.¹⁸ (136-138)

Todd believes that he received this private, personalized revelation not available in Scripture. He assumes that this type of revelation is still being given today, that it is reliable, and authoritative. Can you see how this undermines a belief in the sufficiency of Scripture?

Any Christian who believes seriously that Scripture is sufficient would immediately reject such nonsense. Todd did not. He received it without a hint of skepticism, as do many other Christians.

Babies In Heaven - Mystery Solved!

Another example of their view of this extra-Biblical revelation is seen in how they responded when Colton revealed that he had met his sister in Heaven, a sister who tragically miscarried before Colton was even born.

Allegedly, one day, quite out of the blue, Colton quipped, "Mommy, I have two sisters." When questioned, he continued, "I have two sisters. You had a baby die in your tummy, didn't you?"

Colton's mom asked, "Who told you I had a baby die in my tummy?"

¹⁸ In the interests of space, I edited out some of the commentary and Todd's attempts to scramble together some Bible passages to support Colton's claim. I have kept in tact the essence of the conversation.

Colton replied, "She did, Mommy. She said she died in your tummy" (94).

Colton even described her as "a little bit smaller" than his older sister with dark hair (95).

Colton claimed that, while in Heaven, a little girl ran up to him and wouldn't stop hugging him. He further revealed that this little girl did not have a name since Todd and Sonja had not named their miscarried child. They had not known whether it was a boy or a girl. They insist that Colton could not have known these details.

Their response? After Colton left the room, tears spilled over her cheeks and she said, "Our baby is okay. Our baby is okay." (96)

Then Todd Burpo writes,

"We had wanted to believe that our unborn child had gone to heaven. Even though the Bible is largely silent on this point, we had accepted it on faith. But now, we had an eyewitness: a daughter we had never met was waiting eagerly for us in eternity." (97)

First, the Bible is not largely silent on this point. There is plenty of evidence that babies go to Heaven when they die.¹⁹

Second, notice how this revelation from Colton is accepted as an authoritative eyewitness account which gives us information *that the Bible does not offer* - at least from Todd Burpo's view.

Burpo is asserting that where the Bible is silent, his son can speak with authority. If you have wondered what happens to babies when they die, you can wonder no more. He can tell you. Colton is an eyewitness who has settled the dispute for us. No longer do we have to study Scripture to find out. No longer do we have to take it by faith since "the Bible is largely silent." But the **Burpos** can tell us and we can fix our hope on that.

Todd Burpo is claiming that something was revealed to his boy that was not revealed to the prophets and apostles. Most tragically, Burpo's confidence in the eternal destiny of his unborn child rests, not on Scripture, but on the testimony of his four-year-old boy! The *Bible* offered him no certainty, but now he has assurance because of Colton's *experience*. This speaks volumes about the Burpo's view of Scripture and personal experience.

I hope you can see the hubris inherent in such a view. According to Burpo, information on such an emotional and important topic was not revealed by God to His people until Colton Burpo came along and had his experience. Are we to

conclude that this is because God's Word is inadequate? Or was God just negligent? Was this an oversight? Whatever the reason for this lack of revelation, God has supposedly remedied it by giving us the Burpo experience.

You see, until now, until Colton Burpo, our understanding was limited, flawed, and inadequate. But now, thanks to Todd and Colton Burpo, we can know the things about Heaven and God's plan that millions of Christians before us did not know. All they had to go on was the Bible, but **we** have The Bible **plus** *Heaven is For Real*. Aren't you thankful?

Miscellaneous Theological Concerns

As if all of the above were not sufficient reason for rejecting this book as a blasphemous assault on Scripture, there are a number of other theological concerns with the book.

The Plan of Redemption

Reflecting on his love for his son and his anguish during their trial, Todd Burpo offers this nugget of insight:

"The Scripture says that as Jesus gave up his spirit, as he sagged there, lifeless on that Roman cross, God the Father turned his back. I am convinced that he did that because if he had kept on watching, he **couldn't have gone through with it.**"²⁰ (149)

First, the Bible does not say that the Father turned His back on the Son while the Son was on the cross. Burpo's speculation as to the reason is equally spurious: because the Father could not bear to watch what was happening to His Son. Does Burpo really believe that the Father was somehow shielded from the reality of the cross, or guarded from its harshness because He "turned away" and so He wasn't looking on it? Does God not know about things that He cannot see? Is there anything that God cannot see?

Further, to suggest that the plan of redemption purposed by the Triune God for His eternal glory, somehow hinged upon the flaky emotional state of the Father and His weak stomach for pain and suffering is nothing short of blasphemous!

The cross was God's predetermined plan to accomplish the redemption of sinners for His own eternal glory (**Acts 2:22-24, 4:28; John 6:35-44**). The Father planned redemption and sent the Son to accomplish it. Are we to think that the Father's plan and the Son's ability to fulfill that plan and save God's elect hung in the balance and was

¹⁹ I would recommend John MacArthur's book *Safe In The Arms Of God*.

²⁰ Emphasis mine.

nearly derailed by the Father's vacillating willingness to "go through with it?"

Does Burpo think that the Father did not know what this plan of redemption would cost? Is the Father's plan so fickle that He can be deterred by the prospect of pain? Does he believe that the eternally decreed plan of redemption for God's elect is that uncertain? Apparently, he does.

Power In Preaching

If you think that Colton's visions of the supernatural stopped with his out of body experiences, you would be wrong. The Burpos claim that Colton is still able to witness things happening in the spiritual realm.

One evening, as Sonja was putting Colton to bed, she suggested that they pray for his father, Todd, to have a good message in church on Sunday morning. Colton looked at her and said, "I've seen power shot down to Daddy."

"What do you mean, Colton?"

"Jesus shoots down power for Daddy when he's talking."

Sonja asked, "Okay. . . when? Like when Daddy talks at church?"

Colton nodded. "Yeah, at church. When he's telling Bible stories to people." (125)

Not one to critically question anything that might come from a four-year-old, Todd Burpo waited until the next morning to quiz Colton. Todd writes:

"Hey, buddy," I said, pouring milk into Colton's usual bowl of cereal. "Mommy said you were talking last night during Bible story time. Can you tell me what you are telling mommy about . . . About Jesus shooting down power? What's the power like?"

"It's the Holy Spirit," Colton said simply. "I watched him. He showed me."

"The Holy Spirit?"

"Yeah, he shoots down power for you when you're talking in church." (125-126)

So not only does Colton have the ability to visit Heaven and report to us infallible details of the life to come, but he is also able to see the secret and supernatural workings of the Holy Spirit? Does Todd Burpo question any of this? Does he seem the least bit skeptical? No. He responds with nothing but an uncritical embrace of anything his four-year-old tells him.

Why should I believe that a likely unregenerated four-year-old boy is privy to the secret and supernatural workings

of the Holy Spirit?

A Picture of Jesus

Todd claims that over the course of the months following Colton's alleged visit to Heaven, they discussed what Jesus looked like. Whenever they would see a portrait or painting of Jesus hanging in a hospital, church, or Christian bookstore, they would ask Colton if the picture was a good portrayal of Jesus as he saw Him in Heaven. They would ask him, "What about this one? Is that what Jesus looks like?" (93)

According to Burpo,

Invariably, Colton would peer for a moment at the picture and shake his tiny head. "No, the hair's not right," he would say. Or, "The clothes aren't right."

This would happen dozens of times over the next three years. Whether it was a poster in a Sunday school room, a rendering of Christ on a book cover, or a reprint of an old Masters painting hanging on the wall of an old folks home, Colton's reaction was always the same: he was too young to articulate exactly what was wrong with every picture; he just knew they weren't right. (93-94)

Supposedly, this happens so frequently that it had gotten to the point where instead of asking him, "Is this one right?" they had started asking, right off the bat, "So what's wrong with this one?" (115).

Finally, three years after Colton's alleged visit to Heaven, Todd Burpo was exposed to a December 2006 CNN story about a young Lithuanian-American girl named Akiane Kramarik who lives in Idaho.²¹ According to the CNN documentary available at her website, she began painting at the age of six. However, at the age of four, she began to describe to her mother her visits to Heaven. This little girl began to tell her stories of Heaven and then to depict them in her drawings and paintings.

Todd Burpo found an online picture of her painting titled "Prince of Peace" and called Colton into the room. Burpo writes, "Still, of the literally dozens of portraits of Jesus we'd seen since 2003, Colton had still never seen one he thought was right." (144)

Until he saw the portrait painted by the little girl who also visited Heaven. "Take a look at this. What's wrong with this one?" Todd asked.

21 The Akiane Gallery is located in Post Falls, Idaho. Her website <http://www.artakiane.com/> give samples of her paintings and contains the work of art that Colton would identify as a true representation of the Jesus he saw.

He turned to the screen and for a long moment said nothing.

“Colton?”

But he just stood there, studying. I couldn't read his expression.

After a bit, Colton claimed, “Dad, that one's right.”(145)

Todd Burpo claims that Colton hadn't known the portrait, called *Prince of Peace: The Resurrection*, was painted by another child - a child who had also claimed to visit Heaven.

For Todd, this was proof positive that, not only had his boy visited Heaven and seen Jesus, but so had another girl who had perfectly captured the Jesus she saw in a painting. For me, this just simply proves that two 4-year-olds were both deceived by the same demon.

If Todd Burpo is right, if this is the Jesus of Heaven, then every other portrait of Jesus should be scrapped and Aikane's picture should come standard in every Bible printed. If this is the real Jesus, then we have an eyewitness to Jesus' physical features. Details not contained in Scripture have been captured on canvas for us. What God kept Apostles and Prophets from revealing, He has now revealed to us through a couple of children who visited Heaven when they were four. We wonder no longer what Jesus looks like in His glorified state. We can now place alongside inspired writings, an inspired portrait of Jesus from an eyewitness.

Can you see where this nonsense leads us?

Gospel Presentation

One feature that relentlessly plagues these accounts of alleged trips to Heaven is the complete lack of gospel presentation. Neither Don Piper's book nor the Burpo book contain anything that approaches a clear understanding and communication of essential gospel truths.

Todd seems to think that Colton had a sufficient grasp of the essential doctrines of the gospel when he (Colton) asked about a deceased man at his funeral, “Did the man have Jesus in his heart?” (57-58). Colton insisted, “He had to have Jesus in his heart! He *had* to know Jesus or he can't get into Heaven!”

Of course, one must know Jesus Christ savingly. Without a saving relationship to Christ as Lord and Savior through repentance and faith in His death and resurrection on our behalf, we cannot get into Heaven. Todd Burpo never shares this vital information. He reminds us that Jesus loves children, that Jesus loves everyone, and that Heaven is real. However, there is no presentation of the gospel which might

bring someone to a saving knowledge of Christ.

This book contains no presentation of the law of God, sin, the wrath of God, the reality of or reason for Hell, the justice of God, or even the reason that Jesus died on a cross. We are told that Jesus died, but how that applies to lost sinners is never explained. Further, there is no mention of the need for repentance or personal faith in Christ as the satisfaction for God's wrath.

Todd Burpo's understanding of the gospel is seen in a conversation with Colton that he records.

“Colton, do you know why Jesus died on the cross?”

He nodded, surprising me a bit.

“Okay, why?”

“Well, Jesus told me he died on the cross so we could go see his Dad.” (111)

Understandably, this is the language employed by a five-year-old (at the time). We could allow for some lack of clarity and precision from Colton, but it is what Todd says next that is truly sad: “Colton's answer to my question was the simplest and sweetest declaration of the gospel I had ever heard” (111).

Has Todd Burpo never read **1 Corinthians 15:3-4**? *Paul* gives the simplest and sweetest declaration of the gospel I have ever heard! Colton's answer does not tell us that Jesus died to atone for sin, to pay a sin price. It does not tell us why His death was necessary or how one comes to Heaven because of it. Do we all get to go to Heaven? Does everyone go? How is His death applied to me? How do I get to Heaven through that? Those questions are never answered by this, the “simplest and sweetest declaration of the gospel” that Todd Burpo has ever heard.

Why is the gospel missing in this book? If Heaven is real and Hell is real, and if Todd Burpo is so absolutely convinced of these verities, then *why* would he withhold or leave out the most valuable detail imaginable, namely, the message of the gospel that rescues people from Hell and takes them to Heaven?

If God were going to be in the business of revealing His Heaven to living visionaries today, don't you think He would choose someone of sound doctrine who would actually understand and communicate the gospel message? Why is it that those who visit Heaven always demonstrate such horrible theological confusion and ignorance of the gospel? Maybe it is not God who is the source of these experiences after all.

Scripture Twisting

Todd Burpo's use of Scripture in this book is nothing short of perverse. Whenever a word, a phrase, or an image from Scripture can be somehow employed to reflect a similarity to something communicated by Colton, Todd does not hesitate to reference it. Todd Burpo abuses the Word of God in order to lend credibility to Colton's experience. Consider the following examples.

Acts 1

On page 72-73, Colton claimed that Jesus was the only one in Heaven without wings. "Jesus just went up and down like an elevator." Then Todd Burpo writes,

The book of Acts flashed into my head, the scene of Jesus' ascension. . . Jesus went up. And will come down. Without wings. To a kid, that could look like an elevator." (72-73)

Is that what the account in Acts is intended by Luke to tell us - the mode of Jesus' transportation in Heaven? Luke was describing how Jesus ascended from Earth to Heaven in the presence of His disciples. Colton was describing how Jesus gets around in the current Heaven. Yet we are supposed to think that **Acts 1** lends credibility to Colton's account just because, in both instances, Jesus ascends. This supposedly makes Colton's claim that everyone has wings sound Biblical. That is an abuse of the text that would make a Jehovah's Witness blush! If only it stopped there.

2 Peter 3:8

When Colton claimed that his time in Heaven had only lasted three minutes, Todd tried to figure out how Colton could have met everybody he claimed to have met and done all the things he claimed to have done in only three minutes of time. He finally concluded,

It was also possible that time in heaven doesn't track with time on earth. The Bible says that with the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day."²² (78)

This verse has nothing to do with the perception or keeping of time in Heaven. Peter is reminding his readers that, though from our perspective, we may get anxious waiting for the promises of God to be fulfilled, God works on His own timetable. God is not late in fulfilling His purposes, but right on time since God is not affected by time the way we are. Burpo uses this verse as if it is intended to show us that time passes in Heaven differently than on earth. It is not describing time in Heaven at all!

²² 2 Peter 3:8

Luke 1:19

When Colton revealed that Gabriel sits on God's left hand, Todd found a verse that "proves" that as well.

"Gabriel. That makes sense. I remembered the story of John the Baptist and the moment when Gabriel arrived to deliver the news of John the Baptist's coming birth." (101)

He then quotes **Luke 1:19**, "The angel answered and said to him, 'I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God,....'" (102)

This is offered as proof of Colton's claim, "And now, more than two thousand years later, my little boy was telling me the same thing." (102)

Actually, no. His boy was claiming that Gabriel sits on the left hand of the throne of the Father the way that Jesus sits on His right. That is not something described in Luke's account. Gabriel claimed that he "stands" in God's presence. Colton claims that Gabriel sits at the left hand of God's throne.

But, for Todd Burpo, that is enough biblical support for Colton's extra-biblical revelation. The Bible mentions Gabriel being in God's presence, therefore we should trust Colton's outlandish claims! Never mind the details!

Hebrews 12:1

Colton claims that he was able to know of his parents' need for the Holy Spirit while in Heaven and so, while there, he was praying for them (102). This reminded Todd of another passage of Scripture he could twist.

This took my breath away. Colton saying that he was praying for me in heaven reminded me of the letter to the Hebrews, where the writer says: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."²³ (102)

In **Hebrews 12:1**, the "great cloud of witnesses" is a reference to the extended list of saints given in chapter 11 who accomplished great things by faith. These men and women are examples to us of living a life of faith in a hostile world trusting in the promises of God to His people. What does this have to do with Colton's ability to know of his parents' plight back on Earth? Todd does not explain, so we are left to conjecture what connection Todd Burpo saw between the Hebrews passage and his son's claims. It seems that Todd is referring to Colton's claim to have "witnessed" His parents' need from Heaven. Can you see the connection? Hebrews speaks of dead people being

²³ Hebrews 12:1

witnesses to us. Colton **witnessed** us back on Earth. See? See?! See how Biblical Colton's statements are?

Hebrews 12:1 is not saying that these "witnesses" are in Heaven watching us, but rather that they give testimony, they give witness to us that the life of faith is duly rewarded. But, for Todd Burpo, all that is needed to press a text of Scripture into service to support his son's outlandish claims is some *conceptual connection*, even if that connection is only apparent to Todd. No stretch is too much. The intended meaning of the passage never stands in the way of Todd using it to lend credibility to his son's claims.

Mark 10:14

Todd Burpo uses Jesus' statement in **Mark 10:14** to validate the supposed heavenly visitations and visions of Akiane Kramarik,²⁴ "Permit the children to come to Me..."

This is quoted to show that "God can reach anyone, anywhere, at any age - even a preschool girl in a home where his name had never been spoken" (143).

Supposedly, this little girl started visiting Heaven when she was only 4 years old and then began to report what she saw. Her mother, who had been an atheist, slowly "began to accept that Akiane's visions were real and that therefore, God must be real" (143). All of this is supposedly what Jesus meant when He said, "Let the little children come to me."

In the context of **Mark 10:14**, Jesus uses the simple trust of a child to illustrate the faith that is necessary to enter the Kingdom. The dependence of a child upon the will and goodness of others for their provision is what is commended. Jesus was saying that the person who imagines that he or she is somehow worthy of God's favor or that their entrance into the kingdom is somehow merited by social rank, will never see the Kingdom. They must come like a child, recognizing they have nothing, completely dependent upon the will and work of God on their behalf. The application of this is seen in the very next passage (**Mark 10:17-31**) where Jesus encounters the Rich Young Ruler.

But to Todd Burpo, this statement was proof that God is in the business of revealing Himself to theologically unsound four-year-olds.

2 Corinthians 12:1-6

Todd Burpo's use of this passage is an example of both ignorance of Scripture and misuse of Scripture. He cites Paul's vision of Heaven mentioned in **2 Corinthians 12**, but misses a very important detail, namely, that the person Paul

24 The child artist mentioned earlier.

is describing in the third person is himself. Burpo writes,

Then I remembered that the Bible talks in several places about people who had seen heaven *without* dying. The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth about a Christian he new personally who was taken to heaven, "Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know - God knows. And I know that this man. . . was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell" (80).

Burpo should know better! Though the apostle Paul is speaking in the third person, he is describing himself, which is evident from verse 7,

Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep **me** from exalting **myself**, there was given **me** a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment **me** - to keep **me** from exalting **myself**."

Who was this man that went to Heaven and received such a spectacular revelation? It was Paul, not some Christian he personally knew. Is Todd Burpo really that ignorant of Scripture?

Not only does he show ignorance of this passage, which he supposedly knew so well that it popped into his mind (80) during a conversation with Colton, but he misuses the passage as well. He cites this passage²⁵ as proof that people can visit Heaven without dying.

Todd had always believed that people had to die to visit Heaven, yet when he read the Operative Report,²⁶ he noticed there was no mention of Colton dying on the operating table. He tried to square this with what he reads (or better, misreads) in Scripture. That is when he realized that the Bible gives accounts of people seeing Heaven without dying. Burpo uses the account of Paul's revelation as proof that his son could go to Heaven without suffering physical death.

It does not follow that since revelations were given to inspired Apostles hand-picked by Christ for the writing of the New Testament, God is therefore giving similar and even more detailed revelations to 4-year-olds today. This should be obvious to any student of Scripture.

The desire that Burpo has to prove the legitimacy of his son's experience may be what caused him to get the details of Paul's revelation wrong. After all, if it was the *Apostle Paul* that had the revelation, then Burpo would certainly be hard

25 He also cites the apostle John as one who visited Heaven without dying.

26 This is given in detail in the book on page 78-79.

pressed to suggest this is normative. It would be even more difficult to prove it so. However, if it is was just someone Paul knew, another average Christian, then that certainly suggests that this type of thing was common in the early church. If common then, the reasoning goes, it would be more likely now. The way in which Burpo gets that detail wrong at least is suggestive that it is experience that drives his understanding of Scripture and not the other way around.

Further, Burpo's citation of Paul actually proves fatal to his own claims. It is a bit ironic that Burpo quotes the part of the passage where Paul says he is not permitted to reveal what he saw. Paul said he **“was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak”**²⁷ (v. 4).

Paul saw and heard things he was not permitted to describe. If Paul wasn't permitted, why is Colton? The very passage that Burpo cites to show that his son could visit Heaven teaches that if he had, he wouldn't be permitted to speak of it! Yet this entire book is just that: accounts of Colton speaking of Heaven!

And what are we to make of the fact that Paul, a great mature, godly man, had to be given an affliction to keep him humble after such a revelation? What about Colton? Does he not have any pride? Are we to believe that there was danger of Paul falling into the sin of pride, but there is no danger of that for Colton or Todd?

A mature Apostle is not permitted to speak of his time in Heaven, but a four-year-old boy can. A godly, seasoned Apostle is afflicted to keep him humble, but a four-year-old boy who can't even clearly articulate the gospel needs no such safe-guard.

You should be able to spot the huberis, and it is not in Paul.

Revelation 21:23

At one point Todd tried to trick Colton into saying something about Heaven which might be wrong. He said to Colton,

“I remember you saying you stayed with Pop. So when it got dark and you went home with Pop, what did you two do?”

Suddenly serious, Colton scowled at me. “It doesn't get dark in heaven, Dad! Who told you *that*?”²⁸

I held my ground. “What do you mean it doesn't get

dark?”

“God and Jesus light up heaven. It never gets dark. It's always bright.”

The joke was on me. Not only had Colton not fallen for the 'when it gets dark in heaven' trick, but he could tell me why it didn't get dark: “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp' (104).

Burpo is quoting from **Revelation 21:23**. Strictly speaking, this verse does not refer to the present Heaven, but to the future Heaven; the New Heaven and Earth. In that passage, John is describing the New Jerusalem in the future, eternal Heaven. Burpo cites the passage as if it were describing the present Heaven and thus fitting Colton's description.

Granted, this is not a huge error, but it is another example of Todd Burpo using a passage without regard to its context or meaning.

This type of serial abuse of Scripture is inexcusable! Todd's misuse of biblical texts demonstrates an ignorance of their context, theology, and basic principles of interpretation. Todd Burpo is a pastor, and as one who believes himself called to lead and teach others, he should be able to evidence some ability to exegete Scripture and interpret it properly. Unfortunately for Todd, those he leads, and those who read this book, he lacks that ability.

Conclusion

The popularity of this book is itself a sad commentary on the state of modern evangelicalism. It is evidence that the church is suffering from a lack of discernment and concern for the truth. Todd Burpo demonstrates a complete lack of critical thinking ability and biblical discernment.

This book only serves to undermine confidence in the sufficiency, authority, and truth of Scripture. Christians are asked to base their confidence in Scripture's teaching upon the unreliable and unconfirmed testimony of a small child. Colton's claims do not present a picture of Heaven that is consistent with Scripture (Todd Burpo's abuse of Scripture to make it appear so, not withstanding). This book consistently twists, misrepresents, and wrongly applies God's Word.

This book is poison to the Body of Christ. Some will mistakenly think that they can “eat the meat and spit out the bones.” This book is all bones. There is nothing redeeming in this book. Its blasphemies, abuse of Scripture, and childish portrayal of God make this book fit only for the trash

27 The translation given in *Heaven Is For Real* renders it as, “He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.”

28 Emphasis original.

heap. Its portrayal of the gospel is tragic. Its description of Heaven childish. Its theology is a train wreck. Its effect can only be ruinous by any measure.

Why would God give a revelation of Heaven to a four-year-old boy whose ability to communicate, is limited not only by his age, but his theologically undiscerning father? Why is this visit to Heaven riddled with contradictions to Scripture? Why is this account such a theological wreck? Let the discerning reader ask, "Can this really be the work of God?" I believe the clear answer is "No."

Heaven is real. I believe this not because I personally know anyone who claims to have gone there. It is not because I have read the accounts of Colton Burpo or Don Piper. It is because Jesus says so. God's Word is clear enough and it is sufficient. I believe it. I don't need Colton Burpo to confirm it. In fact, I don't need **anyone** to give me confirmation. I am as certain about the reality of Heaven as I am of my own existence.

The Word of God makes books like *Heaven Is For Real* completely unnecessary. Scripture tells us everything we need to know about Heaven. It tells us everything God wants us to know about Heaven. If God had intended more, He would have included it from the inspired writers of Scripture. Rest in Scripture and Scripture alone. May this book and **all of it's details** be quickly forgotten and lost to the dustbin of history.

Without Wax -

