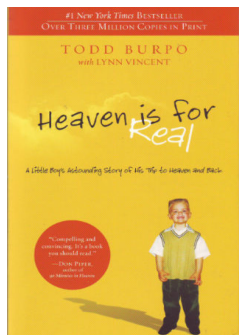


What About ... "Heaven Is for Real"?

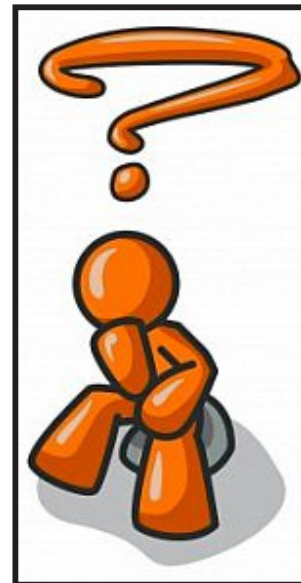
BY REBECCA S. MAY

Colton Burpo certainly was not the first person to claim to have been to heaven and back. But perhaps he is the youngest. At three years of age, Colton was rushed to the hospital with a ruptured appendix. Colton's out-of-body experiences began immediately as he informed his parents that he could see them praying outside of his hospital room. Not long after that, Colton spoke of his experience in heaven, such as meeting Jesus and John the Baptist, watching angels sing, and petting Jesus' rainbow-colored horse.

Who would be so mean that they would call a child a liar? First of all, I'm not calling Colton a liar. I have no idea whether he experienced those things or not. Only God knows. This is not a critique of the "realness" of Colton's belief of his experience. This is an analysis of how we should treat the experiences of others. What are the implications of using experience to determine truth, and what affect does that belief have on the Bible?



Experiences certainly get people's attention. Because they are felt, experiences seem more real than words written on a page. But just because something happened does not mean it is true in the sense of having the ability to lead others to the truth. Remember when the rich man



died and opened his eyes in Hades? He begged Abraham to send him back to earth to warn his brothers. He was convinced that if they experienced someone returning from the dead, they would believe. But Abraham said, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31). No matter how mind-boggling an experience may feel, truth cannot be determined from experience. Truth is objective. If something is true, it is true for everyone. Experiences are subjective. They are only felt by the one who had the experience. It is illogical to use an experience to verify the truth of an experience.

Many have supported Colton's book, saying that we should compare our experiences with the Bible to determine whether they are true. The problem with that is, experiences have the liability of being experiences, whether they conform to the pages of Scripture or not. Many (although not all) of Colton's claims are consistent with what the Bible says is true. But his experiences are still only his, and Colton's father was not inspired to write Colton's story as Luke was inspired to write Jesus' story. If you believe what he said is true, that it confirms the truth of God's Word, you are saying Mr. Burpo was like Luke. This either elevates Burpo to the level of an apostle or it lowers biblical writers to the level of your average believer. According to *The Berean Call*,

"In this well-meaning narrative, Holy Scripture's authority comes to be less important than the testimony of Colton Burpo. His father tells how he (and theirs) came to believe in God's promises more strongly than ever before. But apparently, the testimony of the prophets and apostles and Christ Himself in Scripture was not enough. The convictions that God hears the prayers of His Christians, ...and that Christianity itself is true is established as certain through Colton's testimony about heaven—how shaky a foundation for the saints of the Lord! I could have an experience in which all my claims match those of the Bible, but that still would not verify the truth of the experience" ("Is 'Heaven Is for Real' for Real?: An Exercise in Discernment," *thebereancall.org*).

Colton's testimony, real or not, is extra-biblical revelation. All revelation outside the Bible is not inerrant. We should not "believe" spiritual truths outside of the Word of God. Doing so implies that the Word is not sufficient. Do we have all we need for life and godliness through Christ, as Peter claims? (2 Peter 1:3-5), or are additional revelations necessary? And, if they are, who is to say Colton's is from God and Mohammed's is not—both having claimed to experience God in a unique and individual way. As Geisler says, "Experience is merely a condition of persons, whereas truth is a characteristic of propositions" (*Christian Apologetics*, 80).