

But Are the Testimonies?

SPECIAL REPORT

By Albert James Dager

IN THE PAST 37 years of addressing the many deceptions that have crept into the Body of Christ, I have become increasingly skeptical of anything that smacks of supernaturalism, particularly if it has become accepted and celebrated by a large number of people—even born-again believers in Jesus. That skepticism bolstered my curiosity at the currently popular account of Colton Burpo's alleged visitation to Heaven as he lay on the operating table undergoing emergency surgery to repair internal organs severely poisoned by a burst appendix. As I watched the movie based on his account, and then read the book on which the movie is based, I couldn't escape a nagging feeling that something didn't seem entirely right about such an inspiring story of an average four-year-old boy's remarkable telling of having been in the presence of Jesus, John the Baptist, his stillborn sister, his great-grandfather, and even "God" Himself. His depictions of Heaven and conversations with these persons ring true. Yet in some cases they seem so fantastic as to beg credulity.

The movie is at times a tear-jerker, at times a comedy, but always an attention grabber.

Not quite four years old at the time of his operation, Colton recovered against tremendous odds of survival. His distraught parents, Todd and Sonja Burpo, agonized over his ordeal under the surgeon's knife. While Sonja was on the phone calling friends and family to pray for Colton, Todd, the pastor of Crossroads Wesleyan Church in Imperial, Nebraska, was alone in a room at the hospital angrily confronting God. After having suffered several medical issues over the past couple of years, Todd Burpo had had enough. According to his book, "Tears of rage flooded my eyes, spilled onto my cheeks. 'After the leg, the kidney stones, the lumpectomy, this is how you're going to let me celebrate the end of my time of testing?' I yelled at God. 'You're going to take my son!'"

In the movie, however, Todd is seen in the hospital chapel. His final words are, "You're not taking my son!"

Needless to say, Todd repented of his rage against God, confessing his sin to his congregation. But that was the outcome of Colton's miraculous recovery. No one—I'd dare say not even Todd Burpo—knows if his faith would have remained intact had Colton died that day.

But Colton didn't die, and now his story of his heavenly encounters have made the status of #1 *New York Times* Bestseller with over 8 million copies sold. It has received mixed reviews—raves by conservative and Christian reviewers, and less-than-enthusiastic responses by more secular and liberal reviewers. This is to be expected, of course.

As usual, I don't care so much about how the message is told, as much as I care about the message itself. And there is little fault to be found with any message that insists "Heaven is for real."

But before we can assess whether or not Colton Burpo's story of having visited Heaven is true, we have to take into consideration that his story (published in 2010) is not told by Colton (now 15), but by his father, Todd. As such, it is a third-party account. In a court of law it would be discounted as "hear-say" rather than viable evidence for establishing truth.

Even so, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Todd Burpo who, by all accounts, is an honest and dedicated pastor of a small church in a tiny rural Nebraska town. Both his book and the movie present the Gospel by weaving Scripture into the story. Little Colton's experiences are compared with Scripture. Where there is no supporting biblical evidence, the Burpos rely on faith. As Sonja asked at one point, "Why can't it just be a mystery?"

The movie, co-produced by mega-church "bishop," T.D. Jakes, takes liberties with some of the events described in the book. In the movie, Colton, emboldened by his experience, goes to another little boy who seems on the verge of death in the hospital, takes his hand, and tells him that everything is going to be okay. According to Todd's account in the book, it wasn't a young boy, but an old man who was on his deathbed.

In the book, Todd found a small room in which to pray and eventually rage against God; in the movie he went into a chapel at the hospital.

In the book, Colton describes people in Heaven dressed in white robes with colored sashes; in the movie people are dressed in Western civilian clothes. Jesus, who Colton tells us in the book wore a white robe with a blue sash, is seen in the movie wearing white ancient Jewish garb with a brown belt.

The book states that people in Heaven have wings and halos, whereas only the angels have wings in the movie.

One scene that is in the movie, but not in the book, involves Carrie who is taunted by two boys who make fun of Colton's experience. Carrie's response is to punch them both in the nose, knocking them to the ground. When Todd finds out about it, he reminds Carrie about "turning the other cheek, to which she replies, "I turned their other cheeks."

This evoked laughter from the "Christians" in the audience, but I found it disturbing. Especially when Colton says to his dad, "Pretty cool what Carrie did today, huh?" And Todd replies, "Yeah, pretty cool."

The timeline of the movie is not quite in line with the book on a few occasions, and the dialogue is different in several places. I suppose that can be chalked up to artistic license, but when telling true stories I believe those stories should be one hundred percent truthful, particularly when the story is designed to honor the Lord. Otherwise, how do we know what is true and what isn't true?

Still, the overall telling of little Colton's account between the book and the movie is pretty cohesive. Yet the question still remains, is it true?

When it comes to personal experiences of a spiritual nature, the first thing to remember is that those experiences are personal. No one is required to accept them as truth or even factual. Just because someone claims to have experienced something doesn't mean they did. They may truly believe they had the experience, but people of varying beliefs have reported many experiences unique to their belief systems, often contradictory of other people's experiences. This is true about many who claim to have been to Heaven.

The unique thing about Colton Burpo's out-of-body experience is that, unlike the others, he did not actually die clinically. His heart never stopped, and his brainwaves remained active during the time he said he left his body.

It would be highly unlikely that a four-year-old would be capable of making up such a story of leaving his body and seeing his parents in other parts of the hospital. But that's just what we are told Colton relayed to his father. He saw his father praying in one part of the hospital and his mother on the phone in another part.

Out-of-body experiences can be genuinely experienced, and not just through occult practices. People—even Christians—have been known to leave their bodies then come back and tell of such an experience. Some even claim to have been taken to Heaven and/or "Hell" (I assume they mean the place in Hades where the unrighteous await the final resurrection).

In Colton Burpo's case, there are things we are told he spoke of that he could not have known because he had never been told of them. The most striking testimony is that he met his still-born sister who didn't have a name because the Burpo's didn't know if she was a boy or a girl. She died at two months in the womb. When Colton told his parents of having met her they were stunned.

Is it possible that Colton somehow heard of his stillborn sister from his older living sister Cassie, then subconsciously brought her into his own mind during a vivid dream? The Burpos would say no.

Colton said that Jesus spoke with him as he sat on His lap, that Jesus rode a rainbow-colored horse, and that Colton sat next to the Holy Spirit in front of God's throne, with Jesus sitting on the right side of His "Dad."

Impossible? Who's to say for certain?

Is there any biblical precedent for such an experience? The apostle John tells of being taken to Heaven where He sees Jesus sitting at the right hand of God. But beyond that, no. But, again, one person's personal experience is between him and God; unless it is totally unbiblical, the worst we can classify it is extra-biblical. One may believe it or not believe it, but no one can prove it to be true. We're certainly not bound to it as a new revelation from God.

Scripture doesn't say anything about a rainbow-colored horse, but we know there are horses in Heaven, and that Jesus is seen riding on a white horse (Revelation 19:11). I can't imagine how a horse could be colored like a rainbow, but with God anything is possible.

Another extra-biblical, and unlikely detail of Colton's experience is that everybody in Heaven has wings except Jesus. The Father's wings are much larger than anyone else's, and He himself is larger than anyone else.

The only mention of wings on any intelligent creature in Heaven are those on the cherubim. But the cherubim seem to be unique to heavenly creatures. In every instance where Scripture relates that angels have appeared to men, they looked exactly like men. Other than the cherubim seen by Ezekiel, no other angels are said to have wings. And there is no mention of wings on humans in Heaven.

This is where we have to ask some hard questions. Are there humans in Heaven? The resurrection has not yet occurred, so how can that be?

Many true believers doubt that after death the saints are taken to Heaven. They believe their conscious souls are in the compartment of Hades where the righteous are kept until the resurrection. Even though Paul tells us that to be absent from the body is to be present with Christ (2 Corinthians 5:8), they would dispute that it means they are taken to Heaven. Rather, they would say, Christ is with them in that compartment of Hades.

Personally, I believe the spirits and souls of the saints do go to Heaven after death for two reasons: 1) Jesus in His resurrected body is at the right hand of the Father in Heaven. This doesn't mean He never moves about, but nothing in Scripture hints at His being in Hades at any time after His resurrection; 2) it would not be such

a blessing to be separated from the Father in Hades, as Paul also tells us that it would be far better to be with the Lord than remain on earth even to continue in ministry (Philippians 1:23).

As far as saints in their bodies in Heaven, there are those who rose with Jesus in the first resurrection:

When He had cried again with a loud voice, Jesus yielded up the spirit.

And, look! The veil of the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom, and the earth quaked, and the rocks split. And after His resurrection the graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints who slept arose, and came out of the graves, and went into the holy city, and appeared to many. (Matthew 27:50-53)

Some question this, suggesting that those saints were raised in the same manner that Jesus raised Lazarus, only to die again. But that is not proven by any other Scripture, and, frankly, it would be ludicrous. Why would the Lord send them back to Hades while He continued into Heaven? The apostle Paul cites the Psalmist to tell us that Jesus led the captives out of captivity:

Therefore, when He ascended up on high, He said He “led from captive the captured, and gave gifts to men.”¹

(Now that He ascended, what is it but that He also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the same who ascended up far above all the heavens so that He might fill all things.) (Ephesians 4:8-10)

These Scriptures indicate that when the Lord rose from the dead He led out of Hades the saints that had died before. They were resurrected bodily and went with Him to Heaven where they await the completion of God’s redemptive plan. Among these are the twenty-four elders who sit on thrones surrounding the throne of God:

After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in Heaven, and the first voice that I heard was as if it were of a trumpet speaking with me, that said, “Come up here, and I will show you things that must be hereafter.”

And immediately I was in the spirit, and, look, a throne was set in Heaven, and one sat on the throne. And He who sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardinian stone, and there was a rainbow round about the throne, that looked like an emerald.

And around the throne were twenty-four seats, and I saw upon the seats twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and they had on their heads crowns of gold.

And out of the throne proceeded lightning and thundering and voices. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

And before the throne there was a sea of glass like crystal, and in the midst of the throne, and round about

¹ Psalms 68:18: You have ascended on high; You have led captivity captive; You have received gifts for men—yes, for the rebellious also—so that YHWH God might live among them.

the throne, were four creatures full of eyes in front and in back.

And the first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle.

And each of the four creatures had six wings about him, and they were full of eyes within. And they do not rest day and night, saying, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.”

And when those creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sat on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sat on the throne, and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, “You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power, for you have created all things, and for your pleasure they are and were created. (Revelation 4:1-11)

Other than those saints who rose with Jesus, no others have yet received their new bodies. Yet according to Colton Burpo, his great grandfather has a new body:

“He’s in heaven. He’s got a new body. Jesus told me if you don’t go to heaven, you don’t get a new body.”

Colton is wrong on both counts. If his great-grandfather is in Heaven, he has not yet received his new body; that will come with the resurrection of the righteous in Christ. And the unrighteous will receive new bodies when they are resurrected to face the Great White Throne Judgment:

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the Word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast or his image, nor had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. This is the first resurrection.

But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished.

Blessed and holy is he who has a part in the first resurrection; on such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him for a thousand years....

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God. And the books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life.

And the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

And the sea gave up the dead that were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead that were in them. And they were judged every man according to their works.

And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

And whoever was not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:4-15)

The unrighteous will be raised to face the second death. Those who have died in Christ since the Lord rose from the dead

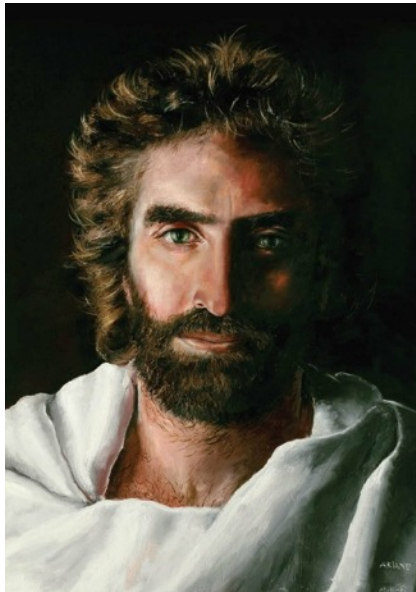
still await the resurrection of their bodies. They are not in Heaven bodily. At best, their souls—their consciousness—with their spirits are in Heaven. As disembodied spirits they do not have the same substance as those resurrected with the Lord.

We can't explain these things beyond what is written, but we do know that the general resurrection of the saints—the first of two future resurrections—will unite the souls and spirits with the bodies of those who sleep in Christ. Thus, it is highly unlikely that anyone given the privilege of going to Heaven would be able to embrace them, or that they would have received new bodies with wings attached.

On the subject of pictorial representations of Jesus, we are told that Todd would often show Colton artists' renderings of "Jesus," all of which

Colton said did not look like Him. But one day, Todd showed Colton a picture of "Jesus" (right) titled "Prince of Peace."

It was painted by a young girl named Akiane Kramarik. At the age of four, Akiane began to exhibit exceptional talent as a painter in acrylics. She claimed that she was given visions by God to paint images of Heaven and of Jesus. At the age of eight she painted the incredibly life-like image of how she saw Jesus as "Prince of Peace." When Todd showed a copy of it to Colton, he looked at the picture and said, "That one's right."



As a result of Colton's response, many believe that Akiane's inspiration for her paintings must be from God, and that this is a true likeness of Jesus.

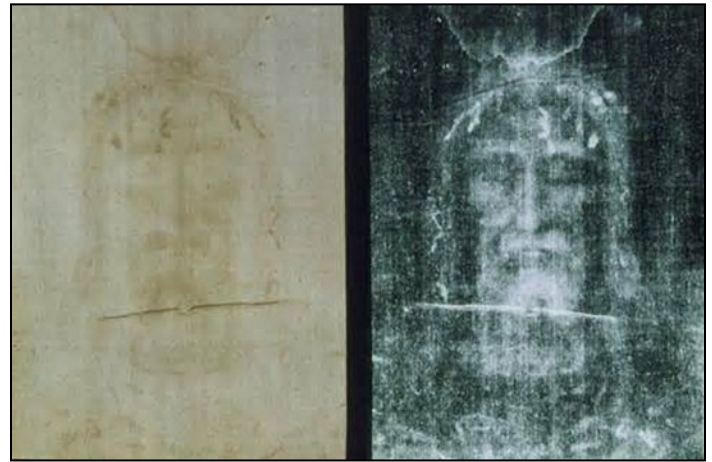
Some have said that Akiane's "Prince of Peace" looks remarkably similar to the image on the enigmatic Shroud of Turin, the alleged (by some) burial cloth of Jesus held by the Roman Catholic Church at the Royal Chapel of Turin, Italy. It is also compared to the ISA Tile (below), a mosaic which is said to have served as



The ISA Mosaic face of "Jesus"

the model for numerous ancient classical depictions of Jesus. This mosaic was discovered in 2002 by Philip E. Dayvault in the depots of a museum in Sanliurfa, Turkey. It is said to be derived from the image on the Shroud of Turin. (The name ISA is Arabic for "Jesus.")

Dayvault has produced what he calls a "Progressive Overlay Comparison of the 'ISA Mosaic Tile', the "Prince of Peace" and the Shroud of Turin." By using computer technology, Dayvault produced gradual fade-ins from the Shroud to to the mosaic, from the Shroud to Akiane's painting, "Prince of Peace," and from the mosaic to "Prince of Peace." The gradual imposition of one image over the other, with the primary image fading away gives the impression that they are so similar that they must depict the same person.



The face of the image on the Shroud of Turin (Left: as it appears in the negative; Right: a negative of the negative image, resulting in a positive image)

At first viewing of the clever imposition of each face over the others, one would be impressed how similar they are. But after looking at the transformations several times, I came to the conclusion that the face on the Shroud, which is in repose (the eyes are closed, as in death), and that of the mosaic, which is in life (the eyes are opened), are not nearly as similar as Dayvault says, or that casual viewing might suggest. The face of the image on the Shroud has a long, rectangularity about it, whereas the mosaic face is ovoid. The eyebrows on the Shroud's image are horizontal; on the mosaic they are arched.

In looking closely at Akiane's "Prince of Peace" imposed over the Shroud's face, again the Shroud's face is longer and more rectangular than that of Akiane's painting. The eyebrows on the Shroud are more horizontal, while those on Akiane's painting tend to be angular, higher at the outside than at the inside of the face. The hair is longer on the Shroud, and the beard is more full.

Too often, people see what they want to see. And, sadly, no amount of reason, logic or empirical evidence will sway them from their position. I'd dare say one could use a computer to morph Adolph Hitler into Mickey Mouse, or vice versa.

More importantly, for those who wish to associate the Shroud of Turin, Akiane's "Prince of Peace," and Colton Burpo's "Jesus" he claims to have met in Heaven, there is a huge discrepancy: Colton's description of Jesus' wounds in His body:

"Jesus was the only one in heaven who had purple on, Dad. Did you know that?"...And he had this gold thing on his head..." Colton chirped enthusiastically. He put both hands on top of his head in the shape of a circle.

"Like a crown?"

"Yeah, a crown, and it had this...this diamond thing in the middle of it and it was kind of pink. And he has markers, Dad."

...I thought through what he had said so far...John the Baptist, Jesus and his clothes, rainbows, horses. I got all that. But what about the markers? What did Colton mean when he said Jesus has markers?

What are markers to a little kid?

Suddenly, I had it. "Colton, you said Jesus had markers. You mean like markers that you color with?"

Colton nodded. "Yeah, like colors. He had colors on him."

"Like when you color a page?"

"Yeah."

Well, what color are Jesus' markers?"

"Red, Daddy. Jesus has red markers on him."

At that moment, my throat nearly closed with tears as I suddenly understood what Colton was trying to say. Quietly, carefully, I said, "Colton, where are Jesus' markers?"

Without hesitation, he stood to his feet. He held out his right hand, palm up and pointed to the center of it with his left. Then he held out his left palm and pointed with his right hand. Finally, Colton bent over and pointed to the tops of both his feet.

"That's where Jesus' markers are, Daddy," he said.

I drew in a sharp breath. *He saw this. He had to have.*

We know where the nails were driven when Jesus was crucified, but you don't spend a lot of time going over those gruesome facts with toddlers and preschoolers. In fact, I didn't know if my son had ever seen a crucifix.

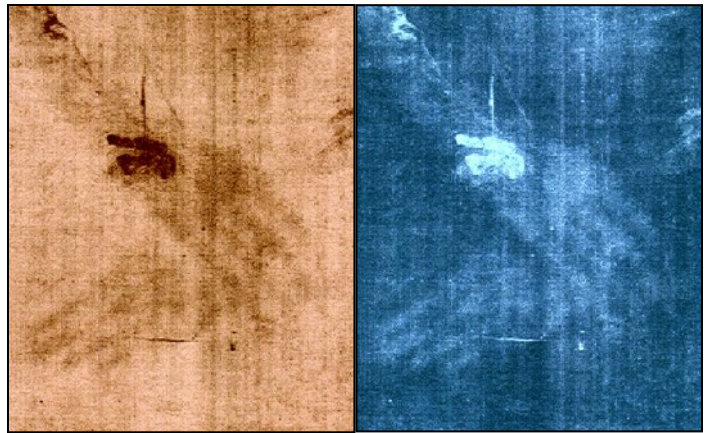
Todd Burpo didn't know where Colton may have learned of "this stuff." But kids pick up things easily. Colton needn't have seen a crucifix; there are plenty of references to the Lord's crucifixion, as well as images, to be found in non-Catholic Sunday school resources.

Still, Colton's casual expression left Todd flabbergasted.

So what is the problem with Colton's description of Jesus' "markers"?

It has been testified by forensics experts and medical professionals that if the Romans crucified people with spikes in the palms of their hands, the flesh and bones in the hands would not be able to bear the weight of a body hanging on the cross. The Romans would have driven the spikes through the wrists, between the bones of the forearm at that point in order to give greater support to the sagging body. By pointing directly in the center of his palms, Colton was describing not the actual place where the spikes were driven, but where common pictorial depictions of the crucifixion place them.

On the Shroud of Turin the blood flows from the wrists of the image (see upper right), more in keeping with forensic science which insists that spikes in the palms of the hands would not support the body of a crucified person. So are these images and Colton's description of "Jesus" are not truly consistent.



Detail of image on the Shroud of Turin, showing blood flowing from the wrists. (Left: original [negative]; Right: negative of negative = positive.)

This isn't to give credibility to the Shroud, but if people are going to use the Shroud to validate Akiane's painting and Colton Burpo's testimony, we should be aware of the discrepancies.

Although today little note is taken of God's prohibition against the Israelites making images of things that are in Heaven or on earth as part of the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4-5), understanding that the prohibition was enacted as part of His command not to worship such images, we cannot take lightly anyone's claim to create images of the Lord.

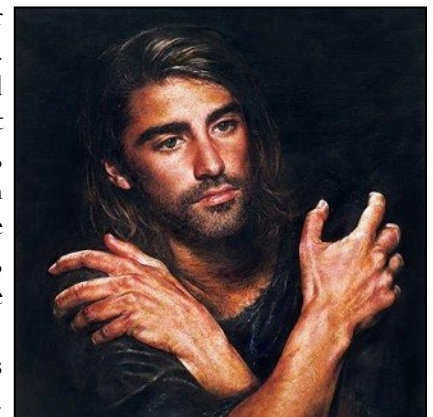
People are actually believing that God gave Akiane Kramarik the vision to paint this picture of Jesus. They truly believe that they are looking into His eyes, or, more accurately, into an image that is an exact replication of His eyes and face.

This alone could give impetus to idolatry. And that is why I don't believe God would allow this, let alone inspire it.

Yet because of Colton Burpo's testimony, Akiane Kramarik's image of "Jesus" is receiving even greater acclaim than before.

But does Akiane really receive visions, or at least inspiration from God? If so, then her paintings are equivalent to Scripture on a visual level. We must believe and accept them as from God, simply because He would have inspired them, and He does not spread His knowledge and gifts haphazardly.

The fact is that Akiane has painted at least two other images of "Jesus" that are offered for sale through her gallery. (She may have painted more, but they are not found there.) One, titled, "I Am," painted later than the one Colton says is the right one, looks similar, but not exactly the same (right).



In Akiane's art, Jesus is one handsome man. Does he look as He did when on earth, or did He get better looking? Evidently everyone else looks the same, albeit younger if they died in old age, so we should expect that Jesus would look the same as well. What does Scripture say about his looks? Not

much, except that he wasn't handsome, so that anyone would desire Him:

For He shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground. He has no form nor handsomeness; and when we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. (Isaiah 53:2)

Nor does the "Jesus" Colton claims to have seen in Heaven match the Jesus that the apostle John saw:

I John, who also am your brother and companion in tribulation, and in the Kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the Word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.

I was in the Spirit on the Day of the Lord, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying, "I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last," and, "What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven assemblies that are in Asia—to Ephesus, and to Smyrna, and to Pergamos, and to Thyatira, and to Sardis, and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

And I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks, and in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and belted about the waist with a golden belt.

His head and His hair were white like wool—as white as snow—and His eyes were like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass as if they burned in a furnace, and His voice like the sound of many waters. (Revelation 1:9-15)

John's description of Jesus is similar to that of Daniel's description of YHWH who appeared to him at Babylon:

Then I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a certain man clothed in linen, whose waist was belted with fine gold of Uphaz:

His body also was like the beryl, and His face as the appearance of lightning, and His eyes as lamps of fire, and His arms and His feet like the color of polished brass, and the voice of His words like the voice of a multitude. (Daniel 10:5-6)

We know that when Jesus appeared to His disciples after His resurrection, He looked much as He did before He died, except that His hands and side bore the marks of His crucifixion. This is how His disciples were able to recognize Him as resurrected in His body, and not just as a spirit. But descriptions of Him since that time are more akin to how He appeared as YHWH to Daniel. They reveal Him as transformed from His mundane body to a glorious, resurrected body of eternal quality.

Is He able to shed one body for another at will? I suppose that is possible. But considering the discrepancies among the various claims to have seen Him either in Heaven or on earth, these things cannot be relied upon.

All we know for certain is that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, which demonstrates His position as the Father's most favored. Scripture's description of Him in that position does not

match the mundane descriptions offered by those who claim to have seen Him.

The images of Jesus painted by most artists tend to make Him look like a Hollywood heartthrob. No doubt, this appeals to women especially, who are prone to look upon the Lord as a love object rather than as their Lord and Master to whom they must answer for their sins. That's not to say the Lord is not loving; it's merely to say that emotions often cloud one's perception of reality.

Although this particular painting by Akiane has grabbed the attention of Christians in particular, most of her paintings are of mundane things—people, landscapes, animals, flowers, etc. She has a few images that she says depict Heaven, which show alabaster buildings and flowered landscapes.

But Akiane's spiritual musings are not restricted to "Christian" symbolism. Some are esoteric and even eastern mystical. One in particular is of a Buddhist monk posing in meditation, inspired by such a monk who came to visit her one day. Her description of how she was inspired to paint it accompanies the picture on the facing page.

Akiane's portraits of angels, allegedly inspired by God, are depictions of whimsical females with wings, more akin to fairies than to the warriors of God's armies. The pictures on the facing page are examples.

One should reasonably expect that if God were truly behind such artistic expressions of heavenly beings, at least some of them would match Scripture which in every instance describes angels in masculine terms with masculine names. But all of Akiane's "angels" are female.

For some reason, Satan has convinced even the most ardent believers in Jesus to accept "angels" as female. Most Christian paintings and statues of "angels" are feminine. Yet God's Word portrays them as fearsome warriors commissioned to fight against the forces of Satan's dark domain.

These things are an affront to God. And wouldn't you know it, but the angels in the movie *Heaven is For Real* are depicted mostly as females also, not so much by their physical presence which is kept obscured through special effects, but by their voices, both singing and spoken.

In the book, at least Colton speaks of God's angels as warriors along whom the saints will fight, including Colton's father:

So here we have a book and movie allegedly depicting a young boy's visit to Heaven, with dubious elements, giving credibility to the paintings of a spiritually confused young lady, produced by "Bishop" T.D. Jakes, of questionable spiritual understanding, broadly accepted within the Christian community. And few are questioning the validity of it all.

Nor are many, if any, questioning Todd Burpo's qualifications to teach the Body of Christ. By all indications, he is a genuine believer in Christ Jesus; he understands God's Word sufficiently to relate some elements of truth beyond the milk of the Word. And there's no question that he is sincere in his faith and his love for his family. It's just that such experiences can be pretty heady, and cause one to give more credence to what one hears than should be given.



AKIANE KRAMARIK'S DESCRIPTION FOR HER PAINTING OF A BUDDHIST MONK

I was always interested in Asian culture, and recently my interest focused on Southeast Asia—India, in particular.

My dilemma was that there were virtually no Asian Indians in our local area, and if I had worked only from my imagination, it still would not have been enough, because any authentic culture demands a thorough knowledge of traditions and customs.

Ironically, a few months later a gentleman from England called my gallery to make an appointment with me. When he arrived to our Idaho gallery we were stunned to see a Hindu Swami from top to bottom dressed in his own traditional robes.

His intention was only to share an urgent, confidential and spiritual message, then return back home. But after hearing him, we all convinced him to stay with us longer. During five days of his visit he was teaching us about his culture and faith, eventually agreeing to model for me.

This turned out to be a four-month-long painting project, because every detail had to be authentically accurate.

The Enlightenment is not only about the Hindu worship and prayer, but about all of us finding our own way to spiritual enlightenment, peace and contentment.

Respecting the differences of our spiritual crossroad paths demonstrates maturity and is part of reaching the enlightenment.

Everybody needs time to reflect and contemplate, and the most inspirational and peaceful place to do so is the nature.

Through the Swami's focus on beauty, wisdom and love everything is reviving, both spiritual and physical thirst is getting quenched, and the scorched hill is releasing its first flower as a symbol of rebirth.



“The Angel”
A “Guardian Angel”
By Akiane at age 10



“Angel Love”
Hair of pure gold. Veil of pure energy. Face of pure beauty.
What the angel gazes at is of eternal significance. Yet what it is has not been revealed to me.



“Battle”
By Akiane at age 16

Something that struck me as questionable is Colton's claim that Jesus wanted his dad to become a pastor:

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

Just as I was wondering privately why in the world something like my vocation would even come up, Colton surprised me when he nodded enthusiastically. "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."

What is questionable is the Lord being so happy about someone wanting to be a pastor in the institutional church system. Pastors act primarily as priests to their congregations, and are bound by the theological interpretations of Scripture in which they are educated. That is not the pattern for the Body of Christ established by the Lord. The priesthood of all believers is subdued to the authority of pastors. Jesus tells us in His Word that He hates the works of the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:6-16).

The word *Nicolaitan* is Greek is a combination of *Nico* (victory) + *Laitan* (laity), which equates to those who assume victory over the laity. This is what pastors within institutional Christianity do by the very nature of their jobs. It isn't that these pastors are evil or hold the same pagan doctrines of the Nicolaitans of which Jesus spoke. Many are good men who truly wish to serve God. But they are locked into a religious system that, in Christianity, is on a par with the rabbinical Judaism that fought against God's truth during Jesus' time on earth. It isn't that Todd Burpo is evil; he certainly isn't. It's that the pastoral system under which he works is contrary to the biblical model for the gathering of the saints. That is to be under an autonomous structure wherein a plurality of qualified elders serve the local assembly, with no individual pre-eminent.

It is highly unlikely that Jesus would be "really happy" to have yet another person assume the position of sole teacher and authority over His *ecclesia*.

These (and others questionable issues found in *Heaven is for Real*) are the nuances that cast doubt on personal testimonies of those who claim to have gone to Heaven. We know that Colton did not go to Heaven in his body. His father testifies to that.

Even the apostle John says he was in the spirit in the Day of the Lord (Revelation 1:1). Paul said he knew of a man who was caught up to the Third Heaven (God's abode), whether in his body or out of his body, he didn't know. But he said something else of great interest to this study:

Over fourteen years ago I knew a man in Christ (whether in the body, I cannot tell, or whether out of the body, I cannot tell; God knows), such a one caught up to the Third Heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell; God knows), how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words that it is not lawful for a man to speak. (2 Corinthians 12:2-4)

This man was not allowed to speak of the things he saw. No one in Scripture, other than John, has been allowed to speak of what he saw in Heaven. And that was for the purpose of giving to the Body of Christ the revelation of things to come. Why is Colton Burpo, or anyone else, allowed to speak of things that are unlawful to utter? Do we need new revelation today?

Some say that because of the testimonies of alleged visitors to Heaven, they now believe in Heaven, or have a better understanding of Heaven, because of Colton's experience.

But does this mean they are any closer to the Lord? Or that their lives are being lived in greater obedience to His Word?

That may be true for some, not because of Colton's experience, but simply because God honors His Word, which may be found scattered throughout the book and movie. But the discrepancies are too many and varied for any mature believer to put any stock in his experience.

We are left with too many questions, and can say nothing more than that it's unlikely that Colton Burpo actually went to Heaven, but rather he may have had an intense dream, or even a vision granted him by some spirit being, the origins of which are unknown at best.

Todd Burpo's claim, "I teach what I find in Scripture," loses its impact when one realizes that he is also teaching that his son's visit to Heaven and the things he relates are truth. If he didn't believe that, he certainly wouldn't have written his book.

In conclusion, believers in Christ must not put stock in the personal testimonies of others, even those whom they know personally, including family. Let us not forget Scripture's warnings:

For Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also are transformed as the ministers of righteousness, whose end shall be according to their works. (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)

For there will arise false christs and false prophets, and they will show great signs and wonders, insomuch that, if it were possible, they would deceive the very elect. (Matthew 24:24)

I don't count Todd Burpo as a false apostle or prophet, but the principle for judging deceptions rests on understanding the wiles of our enemy.

We do not need the testimonies of those who claim to have been to Heaven in order for us to believe that it is for real. We have the more sure word of prophecy, God's written Word, which, if we will live by faith, is sufficient "for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, so that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly equipped for all good works" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Rather than give ourselves over to the questionable accounts of men (and little boys), let us learn to just believe the Lord—to take God at His Word and not follow after "signs and wonders" which Satan may use to deceive us, even in the name of Jesus.

We shouldn't judge Colton Burpo or his family for their questionable testimonies. Every servant of the Lord will stand before Him to give an account in the last days.

And we certainly shouldn't base our faith or beliefs on what others say they experienced. ❖