

Why in the World Are Christians Complaining About 'Heaven Is for Real'?

Some Christians have launched several complaints and opposing viewpoints about the movie *Heaven Is for Real*, which is based on a best-selling book about a little Christian boy who claimed he went to heaven and met Jesus.

Some of these come from Christians we respect highly, and others come from people who are unfamiliar to us and seem to have no faith credentials whatsoever except a trail of anthropocentric booklets refuting many books, movies and people by using practically the same arguments while ignoring the text. In other words, these folks use the unbiblical method of eisegesis, rather than exegesis, to attack books, movies and people.

As a former L.S. attorney in the U.S. attorney's office in the Southern District of New York who later was saved by God's grace alone, I can say with authority that these attacks do not follow the rules of evidence that derive from the Bible itself, which is the Word of God.

With all due respect, the complaints and opposition to the movie don't make much sense.

To prove this, let's examine the two major complaints being made against the movie.

Perhaps the biggest complaint is the notion that instead of looking to a movie like *Heaven Is for Real* to define and affirm our faith, we must look instead to the Bible.

Well, duh! Isn't that true of practically any movie? The only exception to that rule would seem to be a movie that's just a

word-for-word recitation of parts of the Bible, such as the 2003 movie *The Gospel of John*. Of course, even if a movie directly quotes the Bible, someone still could complain that the movie doesn't have the right translation or the right interpretation.

That said, we agree with this point. *Heaven Is for Real* should not be used as a substitute for Scripture. However, the movie never claims to be a substitute for the Bible. Nor does it ask us to ignore the Bible or not to use the Bible as the ultimate authority of the Christian faith. That doesn't mean, however, that the movie can't be used as an aid to Scripture or as an aid to faith and evangelism.

In fact, on that point alone, *Heaven Is for Real* has a lot of good things going for it.

For example, it affirms the existence of an afterlife, including the existence of heaven. Second, it focuses on God and Jesus. Third, it encourages us to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Fourth, it encourages us to display love and acts of kindness overtly here on earth, including an honor of the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus commanded His followers in the Bible to recite.

Fifth, *Heaven Is for Real* portrays a real body of believers who ask each and every question the critics ask without coming to the fallacious conclusions of the critics. After all, the entire story of the movie is the members of the congregation and outsiders trying to figure out if heaven is for real and if the 4-year-old actually saw the things he could not have known that he said he saw.

As such, the movie has more content about church than percent of the many movies ever made. Instead of positing an untenable answer, as the critics have too often done, the movie points to Jesus Christ, the Creator, and says that when we love Him and our neighbor, we see a glimpse of heaven and that when we

hate Him and our neighbor, we turn toward making life hell on earth.

Best of all, the movie ends on the fact that Jesus Christ is real and true.

The second major criticism leveled at *Heaven Is for Real* is that while the Bible has several people, including the apostle Paul, saying they went to heaven, no one returns to talk about their experience in heaven.

While it's true that Paul says in the Bible that he was taken up to heaven but never goes into details about his experience, it's not true that no one in the Bible ever goes to or comes from heaven and returns to talk about it.

In the first place, Jesus Christ Himself, who repeatedly says He came from heaven and from the Father, talks about both heaven and hell a lot. He also talks a lot about God the Father and says that if you've seen Him (Jesus Christ), you've seen the Father.

Finally, in the Bible, Jesus gives us many details about the afterlife—enough details to know that heaven is a really wonderful place and hell is a very terrible and terrifying place. Jesus also talks about God's kingdom of heaven on earth and encourages His followers in Matthew 6:33 to “seek first the kingdom [or rule] of God and His righteousness.” (Guess what? In its own way, using today's vernacular, *Heaven Is for Real* does exactly the same thing! Imagine that!)

Secondly, the apostle John says in the book of Revelation that God gave him a vision of heaven, and John describes that vision in very great detail in that book.

In other words, it's simply not true that no one in the Bible ever goes to heaven and comes to earth to talk about his trip! Both Jesus and His beloved apostle, John, do exactly that.

As Christian scholar Gary Habermas has noted, near-death experiences are, on the whole, a positive sign that there is indeed an afterlife and that the biblical concepts of heaven and hell are not totally made-up fictions without scientific or philosophical foundation. As such, they refute atheism and scientific naturalism's anti-supernatural bias.

That doesn't mean near-death experiences should be a substitute for biblical truth. However, nowhere does the movie *Heaven Is for Real* claim that they are or that it is.

Thus, *Heaven Is for Real* actually reaffirms Christian, biblical faith. It doesn't contradict it.

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