

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

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by Bob DeWaay

"I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago__ whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows__ such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man__ whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows __ was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak." (2Corinthians 12:2-4)

In recent years, a couple of individuals have written hot selling books in which they claim to relate their experiences of visiting heaven and/or hell. When Paulⁱ mentioned his experience in order to fend off the criticisms of false apostles who boasted about visions and revelations, he said that "*a man is not permitted to speak*" of the things which he saw. That was in the first century. Evidently the rules have changed. Now those who claim such visions and revelations write books to describe what they saw. As we shall see, they also claim to have received special revelation about things not revealed in the Bible, and to have been commissioned by Jesus to reveal these things to the church.

The two books we will critique are *A Divine Revelation of Hell* by Mary Kathryn Baxterⁱⁱ and *Heaven -- Close Encounters of the God Kind* by Jesse Duplantis.ⁱⁱⁱ Before we consider the content and merits of these books, we shall briefly discuss a book that was a forerunner of this genre. In 1972 the modern day founder of the "Word of Faith" movement (the health and prosperity gospel), Kenneth Hagin, wrote a book relating his experience of visiting hell, and then later having visions of personal appearances of Jesus himself. The book is *I Believe in Visions*.^{iv} Unlike Baxter, Hagin's claimed visit to hell happened before he was born again. His book focuses more on appearances of Jesus in which Jesus revealed things to him.

The Exact Words of Jesus?

Hagin, in *I Believe in Visions*, claims that Jesus appeared to him in an "open vision" and called him to (among other things) take on the ministry of a prophet.^v One of the disturbing things about this book is that it contains direct quotations from Jesus Himself, published as if they were authentic and authoritative revelation. This creates a dangerous situation in which readers are intimidated into accepting these new revelations lest they be found rejecting Jesus. For example, consider Hagin's citing of the supposed direct words of Jesus: "The Lord said to me, 'If I give you a message for an individual, a church, or a pastor, and they don't accept it, you will not be responsible. They will be responsible. There will be ministers who don't accept it and will fall dead in the pulpit.'"^{vi} Hagin then claims this very thing happened. Pastors are therefore bullied into accepting Hagin's prophetic messages under pains of being struck dead. This creates a false dilemma: either believe the new revelations of this prophet or be killed by God. There is a third possibility: search the Scriptures like the Bereans of Acts 17 to determine whether Hagin's message is true.

I read Hagin's book less than a year after I became a Christian, and was almost taken in by it. Thankfully, toward the end of the book, another quotation of Jesus gave me second thoughts. Jesus supposedly said this to Hagin: "If you will learn to follow this inward witness, I will help you in all the affairs of your life. If my children will listen to me, I will make them wealthy."^{vii} Even as a new Christian, who had scarcely begun my Biblical studies, I knew something was wrong with a Jesus who told Kenneth Hagin that He would make all Christians wealthy if they just followed an "inward witness" that was supposedly the voice of God! The Jesus of the Bible taught "*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*" (**Luke 6:20**). Maybe this "Jesus" who appeared to Kenneth Hagin and threatened to kill pastors who wouldn't listen and promised to make Christians wealthy if they would was not the Biblical Jesus! I decided to lay Hagin's book aside and study the Bible. Especially since on the last page of Hagin's book, Jesus supposedly told him that Christians were in charge of their own personal angels and were to directly order them around to do things like get money for us.^{viii}

As strange as this all is, Kenneth Hagin went on to become hugely successful in terms of finding followers and training up others to carry on the message of the health and wealth gospel. Before this movement really got off the ground, the foundation for it was laid in this book which claimed to be direct revelations from God. Twenty five years later, others have taken the same approach and appear to be quite successful doing so. We shall examine examples of their books.

Visiting Hell

Mary Baxter, an ordained Church of God minister, claims to have received new revelations and to have been commissioned by Jesus himself to write these so that the "world" will know them.^{ix} Her book is replete with first person, direct quotations from Jesus, which she claims to be true and authoritative. She quotes Jesus, "My child, I will take you into hell by My Spirit, and I will show you many things which I want the world to know. I will appear to you many times; I will take your spirit out of your body and will actually take you to hell."^x The book is a best seller and contains the content of her experiences. Perhaps it is selling so well because people think that they could scare themselves and their loved ones out of hell, if a more graphic description of it were given than the one in the Bible.

Baxter claims that Jesus revealed to her that hell is shaped like a woman's body and resides in the middle of the earth. She writes, "Jesus spoke again, 'Hell has a body (like a human form) lying on her back in the center of the earth. Hell is shaped like a human — body very large and with many chambers of torment.'"^{xi} didn't He inspire the Biblical writers to include this information in the Bible? And also, why wait until the twentieth century and reveal this to an American Pentecostal?

Since hell is supposedly in the form of a human body, Jesus took Baxter on a tour, one anatomical component at a time, starting with the left leg. In this compartment of hell are many individual pits with fire and brimstone with each pit holding a lost soul in the form of a skeleton crawling with worms, with a grey mist inside.^{xii} On their tour, Jesus would bring Mary Baxter to individual souls in torment and they would conduct what amounted to an interview. The interviews reveal how and why these people were in hell. Here and elsewhere in the book, people in hell either reveal what they had done, or Jesus would tell them what they had done. They would also cry out to Jesus for mercy, but He would tell them it was too late and they should have repented when they were alive. As a result, His presence and discussions with them added to their torment and they often cursed Him when He refused to help.^{xiii}

The compartments of hell did not contain human inhabitants alone. Satan himself dwelt there with a mass of demons each having appearances such as grizzly bears, monkeys, and various grotesque forms.^{xiv} However, in contrast to the tormented human souls, the demons seem to be having a good time. Essentially, they are able to go about their evil business, be it discharging the commands of Satan or tormenting the souls of the damned.

Preachers are often found tormented in hell for various reasons. One in the right leg of hell was there because he did not believe there was a hell.^{xv} There was even one preaching the gospel.^{xvi}

Another preacher was in the “belly” of hell in a coffin being tortured by twelve demons with spears.^{xvii} Unlike the others, the preacher in the coffin bled as he was tormented. Jesus told Mary Baxter that this preacher had preached God’s Word, served God with his whole heart, and led many to salvation.^{xviii} Yet he was in hell because, among other sins, “before he died he said the Holy Ghost baptism was a lie. . . .”^{xix} Even Satan himself spends a lot of time tormenting this preacher in a coffin.^{xx} Herein lies a veiled threat: do not question Baxter’s particular theology lest you end up in hell. This is reminiscent of Hagin and his veiled threat to dissident preachers.

Is Satan in Charge of Hell?

An interesting aspect of Baxter’s version of hell is that Satan is in charge of it and he seems to be enjoying his job. He laughs as he rips the flesh from bones of tormented souls.^{xxi} He toys with people who had served him during their lives by doing occult activities, Satan worship, and bringing other people to Satan in hopes of being part of his kingdom. However, once he has them in hell they receive no kingdom, only torment. They are sent to the “fun center,” where the people who had been led into following Satan are allowed to torture and torment those who had so led them. Not only do Satan and demons have their fun torturing lost souls, but other lost souls get to join in.^{xxii} This “fun center” dwells in a section of hell with cell blocks “seventeen miles high.”^{xxiii} We learn that Jesus had gone down to this section years ago and taken the Old Testament saints out of cells and the vacated cells are now used by Satan.^{xxiv}

Consider this description of Satan in hell: “Satan was standing with his back to us, and he was all aflame. But he was not being burned; rather, it was he who caused the fire. Now he stood engulfed in the flames, enjoying the cries of these poor, lost souls. As Satan moved his arms, great balls of fire shot from him.”^{xxv} She further describes the situation: “Satan walked through the flames, and they could not burn him.”^{xxvi} Contrast this with the Gospels where Jesus indicated that the fire of hell was prepared for the devil, not that he was in charge of it and not touched by the fire. For example, “*Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels’*” (**Matthew 25:41**). Also, the evil spirits who encountered Jesus were concerned about themselves being tormented: “*And behold, they [the demons speaking through the men] cried out, saying, What do we have to do with You, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?*” (**Matthew 8:29**). There is no indication here that the demons are going to be having a good time in hell, taking people to the “fun center” and tormenting them; but rather they themselves are facing torment.

The idea that Satan is in charge of hell and enjoying the process of inflicting various torments on people is a fictitious notion that comes from popular folk religion but is not taught in the Bible. Part of the problem with Baxter’s book is that it never makes a clear distinction between *hades* and *gehenna*. *Hades* is the Greek word in the New Testament that is used for the place where the lost go upon death, awaiting the resurrection of the body for the final judgement. *Gehenna* is the final abode of the lost, which is also called the “lake of fire.” In **Revelation 20** we find that *hades* is thrown into the lake of fire: “*And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire*” (**Revelation 20:13,14**).

Mary Baxter alludes to this, but persists in using “hell” to describe a place where souls already are, though technically it is the place of final punishment for the wicked, both human and demonic. The first two inhabitants of hell shall be the Antichrist and the false prophet: “*And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image; these two were thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone*” (**Revelation 19:20**). John Walvoord comments on this passage: “By comparison with other scriptures, it seems that the beast and the false prophet are the first to inhabit the lake of fire.”^{xxvii}

Even assuming that Baxter is speaking of *hades* when she uses the term “hell,” it still does not follow that Satan is quite happy there, unscathed by any form of punishment, and actually the one dishing out the punishment. **Luke 16:23** describes *Hades* as a place of torment and distinguishes it from “Abraham’s bosom.” But the fanciful details outlined in Baxter’s book are missing from the Bible as is the idea that Satan is in charge of hell and handing out torments. The Biblical descriptions of the devil show him doing his evil work on earth, or else appearing before God (like in **Job 1:7**) as the accuser of the brethren (**Revelation 12:10**). The world is said to lie in the power of the evil one (**1John 5:19**) and he is considered the “prince of the power of the air” (**Ephesians 2:2**). None of this relates to tormenting lost souls in hell. The only way we “know” that this is Satan’s role is by the new “revelations” found in Mary Baxter’s book.

Christians in Hell

There are lots of ways of ending up in hell, according to this book. The various interviews that Jesus conducts with the damned for the benefit of Mary Baxter’s book, reveal every sort of sin. It is true that unforgiven sin alienates us from God and if persisted in even until death will result in a lost soul consigned to hell. This we are not disputing. However, Mary Baxter makes a point of highlighting Christians whose “sins had been washed away” who end up in hell. From preachers who don’t teach “the Holy Ghost Baptism,” to gossips, ones who do not forgive, ones who are not generous, to people who don’t listen to modern day prophets. Though the basic idea of the gospel is presented in the book, the overall impression I got from reading it is that one’s salvation is tenuous and likely to be easily lost.

For example, Baxter overheard the conversations of two fellows who lived their lives as Christians but ended up in hell. A person in hell is quoted as saying: “I know Jesus, He washed my sins away. In fact, I don’t know what I’m doing here. Nor do I, [another said]”^{xxxviii} We find out that one of them would not loan money to a neighbor for the man’s wife’s funeral because he didn’t believe the neighbor would use it for that and another would not buy clothes for a boy from church because his father was a drinker.^{xxix} So for these sins the two Christians whose sins had been washed away by the blood of Jesus are in hell being tormented for eternity. It is right to give generously and to do everything else Jesus commanded. But the notion that some oversight, some moment of selfishness rather than selflessness, might send us to hell even if we are Christians is likely to leave no one with assurance of salvation. Any lapse and we go right to hell if we die before we get a chance to repent. That is the message I got from reading this book.

This type of teaching arose in the early church after the death of the apostles and eventually resulted in the Roman Catholic system of penance, purgatory, etc. The idea was that any sin committed after baptism would be a blot in the account of the Christian and would stay that way unless the Christian and/or others did some works to resolve the guilt. They imagined (contrary to **1John 1:7**) that the blood of Jesus only cleansed the sins committed before baptism. Though Mary Baxter has no clear explanation about just which sins and how many of them cause Christians to lose their salvation, that they are likely to lose salvation if they die at the wrong moment is clear. This is worse than the Catholic purgatory, because at least Catholics suppose people eventually can get out of there. It is true that many evangelicals do not believe in the perseverance of the saints. However, those (like Mary Baxter) who believe true Christians can lose their salvation should argue their case from the Scriptures. Can Baxter “prove” that the doctrine of perseverance is wrong **on the basis** that she personally talked to people in hell who are damned and at one time were true Christians? How is this any better than the extra-biblical revelations of the Roman Catholic Church?

Are New Revelations Authoritative?

There are other similarities with Rome. Mary Baxter presents us with the exact words of Jesus, in direct quotations, claims they are true, and dangles her readers over the pit of hell if they might decide not to listen to her. For example, she quotes Jesus as He admonishes Mary's readers: "You have not hearkened to the words of My servants, the prophet and the prophetess. Curses instead of blessing have come upon you. . ."^{xxx} So which prophets and prophetesses are we cursed for not listening to — Joseph Smith and Mary Baker Eddy? Maybe it is the Popes speaking *ex cathedra*. Once you allow new revelations to be added to the Bible, all these and more are on the table. This is nothing new. Historically, people who claim to speak for God condemn all those who refuse to listen, including the various cults and false religions. Only the Bible provides solid evidence that its writers really did speak for God.

A Divine Revelation of Hell claims to give new, authoritative revelation to the church. It even adds material to that provided in the book of Revelation, which Revelation itself forbids (**Revelation 22:19**). In Mary Baxter's version, the *Mystery Babylon*, the mother of harlots, has "seven heads and ten horns."^{xxxi} In Revelation it is the beast with the seven heads and ten horns (**Revelation 13:1 & 17:3**). She tells us that the beast will have a high tech "mind-destroying machine" that will mellow people out and make them happy with Antichrist and also a "big bother machine" that will be invisible and let the beast watch every move people make."^{xxxii} This is information that is **not** given in the book of Revelation but directly pertains to it. To make matters worse, listen to what Mary Baxter says about this information: "All these things were revealed to me by the Lord Jesus Christ in an open vision. They are the words of His mouth, and they concern the times of the end."^{xxxiii} She has just added to the words of the Biblical prophecy of Revelation which the Bible forbids.

The underlying problem of all books of this type (where the author makes direct quotes of Jesus and claims new revelations) is that they undermine the authority of Scripture. Paul told us not to even listen to an "angel from heaven" with a different gospel: "*But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed*" (**Galatians 1:8**). Once we get away from the Reformation principle of "Scripture alone" as our authority, we shall be faced with a multitude of competing voices, each claiming to speak authoritatively for God. Today in America there are hundreds of supposed prophets who are publishing material that claims to be directly inspired by Christ and authoritative to the church. But the Scriptures teach that God "*has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world*" (**Hebrews 1:2b**). The tense of "has spoken" indicates a full and final revelation. Everything we will know about heaven and hell during this life and in this age is contained in Scripture. Even if the purpose of books like Mary Baxter's is to motivate us to repent, they do more harm than good in that they undermine the final and complete authority of Scripture.

Visiting Heaven

Compared to Mary Baxter's book, one would have to say the Jesse Duplantis' is "refreshing." Yet it claims to add to our knowledge authoritative information beyond what is revealed in Scripture. Jesse claims to have gone to heaven and been sent back by Jesus to tell people He is coming again. This was not a near death experience but an actual trip to heaven, though he did not know whether in or out of the body."^{xxxiv} A big "blond-headed" angel was involved in his experience.

This book is written in the simple, down-home, southern "awe shucks" approach that characterizes the evangelist who wrote it. Being of the "Word of Faith" ilk, he manages to line up Biblical characters he meets in heaven who agree with him on the prosperity message. For example, he meets King David in heaven who tells Jesse that he should have done a better job with some of the Psalms: "[A]s he explained, 'I allowed God and the anointing to come through in that song [Psalm 23]. In other songs I sang strongly about my troubles. I think I should have allowed more of the answer to come through, instead of the complaining.'^{xxxv} David also told Jesse, 'I wish I had written more songs about God's answers than about my problems.'^{xxxvi} Jesse evidently does not realize that this undermines the doctrine of the inspiration of all Scripture (**1 Timothy 3:16**). If David is apologizing for the lament Psalms, then why did the Holy Spirit inspire him to write them and include

them in the canon of Scripture? But when one realizes that the health and wealth teaching has no time for such things as human sorrows, it makes sense that one of their teachers would go to heaven and find out from David that those passages were some sort of a mistake.

In a similar vein Duplantis talks to Paul and Paul agrees with him on his mis-interpretation of one of Paul's passages. This is the passage: *"Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison"* (2Corinthians 4:16,17). The passage and its context make it clear that Paul is contrasting this temporal lifetime with eternity. However, Jesse Duplantis and supposedly Paul in heaven read it thus: "a moment is **not** a lifetime."^{xxxvii} "Paul" in heaven is quoted, "Change it back to a moment."^{xxxviii} So Paul, now that he is in heaven, is a faith teacher who doesn't think Christians should experience afflictions except for perhaps a moment. So we have a dilemma, do we interpret the passage as Paul wrote it where the phrase "our outer man is decaying day by day" is speaking of the same thing as "momentary" or do we believe a man who talked to Paul in heaven who interprets his own writing in other than the normal grammatical and historical method?

The Trinity gets an interesting twist also. It turns out that Jesse Duplantis saw Jesus and at least the feet of the Father, but not the Holy Spirit when he was in heaven. When he asked where the Holy Spirit was, the answer from Jesus: "on earth."^{xxxix} I guess omnipresence is out the window in this theology. God (not just the Incarnate Christ), as in Mormonism, has a body and the Holy Spirit is not in heaven if He is on earth.^{xl}

I have been told this is also a popular book. I did not expect much when I began reading it and was not disappointed in that regard. It serves as another example of popular folk religion wedded to woeful theological ignorance. No wonder it is so popular.

Conclusion

The Bible contains the whole counsel of God — everything that will be revealed before the second coming of Christ. People have written books about heaven and hell in the past. It used to be that they were at least in the form of fiction, like Dante's *Inferno*. The books we have reviewed claim to impart new revelations to the church. As such, these books ought to be rejected. They not only teach **extra** biblical ideas, they teach **unbiblical** ideas, some worse than others. Thus they lead people astray no matter how noble the ostensible reason for writing, such as to get people to believe in the second coming or to get them to repent. They do far more harm than good. It is the Scriptures that make us wise unto salvation: *"and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness"* (2Timothy 3:15,16).

Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

1. Though Paul (evidently out of humility) speaks of himself in the third person, the context makes it clear that he was speaking of himself. **2Corinthians 12:7** indicates that Paul's thorn in the flesh was given "because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations," which likely is a reference this very experience.

2. Mary Kathryn Baxter, *A Divine Revelation of Hell* (Whitaker House: Springdale, PA, 1993) .

3. Jesse Duplantis, *Heaven -- Close Encounters of the God Kind* (Harrison House: Tulsa, 1996).

4. Kenneth E. Hagin, *I Believe in Visions* (Revell: Old Tapan, NJ, 1972).

5. Ibid. 112-114.

6. Ibid. 115.

7. Ibid. 117.

8. Ibid. 126.

9. Baxter, 14.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid. 34.

12. Ibid. 23,24.

13. For Example, see page 27, and many other places.

14. Ibid. 40., et. al.

15. Ibid. 42.

16. Ibid. 41.

17. Ibid. 69, 70.

18. Ibid. 71.

19. Ibid. 72.

20. Ibid. 73.

21. Ibid. 93.

22. Ibid. 96.

23. Ibid. 81.

24. Ibid. 97.

25. Ibid. 99.

26. Ibid.

27. John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, (Moody: Chicago, 1966) 280.

28. Baxter, 192.

29. Ibid. 193.

30. Ibid. 138.

31. Ibid. 132.

32. Ibid. 166, 170.

33. Ibid. 171.

34. Duplantis, 69.

35. Ibid. 100, 101 — He notes that those were not David's exact words, but the jest of what he meant.

36. Ibid. 101.

37. Ibid. 97 and 153.

38. Ibid. 97.

39. Ibid. 119.

40. Ibid. 114-119.

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ⁱⁱ Mary Kathryn Baxter, *A Divine Revelation of Hell* (Whitaker House: Springdale, PA, 1993) .

ⁱⁱⁱ Jesse Duplantis, *Heaven -- Close Encounters of the God Kind* (Harrison House: Tulsa, 1996).

^{iv} Kenneth E. Hagin, *I Believe in Visions* (Revell: Old Tapan, NJ, 1972).

^v Ibid. 112-114.

^{vi} Ibid. 115.

^{vii} Ibid. 117.

^{viii} Ibid. 126.

^{ix} Baxter, 14.

^x Ibid.

- ^{xi} Ibid. 34.
- ^{xii} Ibid. 23,24.
- ^{xiii} For example, see page 27, and many other places.
- ^{xiv} Ibid. 40., et. al.
- ^{xv} Ibid. 42.
- ^{xvi} Ibid. 41.
- ^{xvii} Ibid. 69,70.
- ^{xviii} Ibid. 71.
- ^{xix} Ibid. 72.
- ^{xx} Ibid. 73.
- ^{xxi} Ibid. 93.
- ^{xxii} Ibid. 96.
- ^{xxiii} Ibid. 81.
- ^{xxiv} Ibid. 97.
- ^{xxv} Ibid. 99.
- ^{xxvi} Ibid.
- ^{xxvii} John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, (Moody: Chicago, 1966) 280.
- ^{xxviii} Baxter, 192.
- ^{xxix} Ibid. 193.
- ^{xxx} Ibid. 138.
- ^{xxxi} Ibid. 132.
- ^{xxxii} Ibid. 166, 170.
- ^{xxxiii} Ibid. 171.
- ^{xxxiv} Duplantis, 69.
- ^{xxxv} Ibid. 100, 101 — He notes that those were not David's exact words, but the jest of what he meant.
- ^{xxxvi} Ibid. 101.
- ^{xxxvii} Ibid. 97 and 153.
- ^{xxxviii} Ibid. 97.
- ^{xxxix} Ibid. 119.
- ^{xl} Ibid. 114-119.