A hell of a thing to believe

Our convictions inevitably shape who we are.

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Human beings spend a lot of time arguing about whether or not our beliefs are true. Even in these strange days where “I feel like” seems to have replaced “I think that” as the, ahem, trump card in a given dispute (how can you argue with a feeling?!), we still invest a fair amount of intellectual, emotional, and rhetorical energy into arriving at, and convincing others of what we believe to be true. Even amidst of the mountain of lies that can sometimes seem to overwhelm our socio-political discourse, the truth of the matter still seems to matter to us.

But of course we as the inheritors and shapers of late modernity can quite easily give the strong impression that the meaning of life is a primarily a cognitive exercise, an arms race to the top in the who-has-the-most-right-content-in-their-head-when-they-die game. We probably pay less attention than we ought to the behaviors that our beliefs demand, and how our behaviors (or the *absence* of behaviors) shape and reinforce what we think. And we probably pay even less attention still to the kinds of people the things we believe are inevitably turning us into.

Last week, I read Brian Zahnd’s new book, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*. It’s a quick read but an important one, particularly for those raised on the “angry God” theology made famous in the Jonathan Edwards sermon that Zahnd’s title is a riff on, and which various outposts of zealous evangelicalism have seized upon ever since. At one point, in a discussion of the doctrine of hell, Zahnd frames the matter in an interesting way:

> I’m very leery of making claims of certitude about precisely what is meant by *hell* and exactly who goes there. **I regard it as extraordinarily**

> **dangerous and detrimental to the soul to go through life convinced that everyone except people like me are going to wind up in hell**.

I was struck in a new way by what Zahnd did with that one sentence. He has spent some time in the chapter talking about the truth of the matter, which is obviously important. He has reevaluated a few key biblical texts, he has made a few christological arguments, he has appealed to human experience of the world. The truth of the matter matters. But here he pauses on a very different set of questions: what do beliefs do to those who believe them? What kind of people do they turn us into? What does the content in our head do to our souls?

I don't know that my beliefs about hell (or anything else) were ever quite as zealous as Jonathan Edwards or the red-faced preachers of American evangelicalism, but there was a time when I did believe that my little clan was the only one that God would be deigning to save. And it was a belief that almost certainly did something to me. I don't think it was good for my soul to believe that every human being I encountered on the street who didn't check off all of the boxes I believed that God required was going to spend an eternity in hell. Check that, I *know* it wasn't good for my soul to believe this. Every interaction was tinged with the question, "I wonder if they're with the good guys or the bad guys?" I was probably incapable of simply encountering another person without having the "in or out" question rumbling along in the bowels of my brain. This can't be a good thing for the growth of a soul.

Is it possible to believe that everyone who doesn't believe what you believe is going to hell and still be a kind, decent, loving human being? Sure. I've known people like this. But maybe all this proves is that it's possible to be better than your theology (which, to be fair, most of us should be hoping for). Or that some theology is really difficult to consistently live out while still being able to live with yourself. We human beings can be quite skilled at and willing to live with an enormous amount of cognitive dissonance.

Is it possible that God *requires* us to have beliefs that can easily turn us into less than we were made to be? Sure, it's possible. It's possible that life really *is* an arms race in the right-beliefs-in-my-head game. All kind of things are *possible* in the world. But for the Christian, the appropriate question is, "Is it *likely* that this is what the God revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ has in mind for a human life?" When we look at Jesus—at what he said and did, how he lived and died—do we get the

impression that what matters most to God is that human beings arrive at a prescribed number of right ideas before they die? Possibly. But not likely.

Of course it should go without saying (but probably doesn't) that there are all kinds of beliefs and ways of holding them that can be corrosive to human souls. Conservative evangelical eschatology is an easy target in many ways, and its spokespeople have been loud enough for long enough to warrant whatever criticisms come their way. I use this example only because I am familiar with the terrain. But I have encountered language just as vile and hateful and dismissive of real human beings on the so-called liberal end of the belief spectrum as I have on the conservative one. The belief that I (and everyone like me) am right and everyone else is wrong (and stupid, possibly even damnably so) is not the province of any particular ideology or perspective. It is a uniquely *human* proclivity. And it damages our souls—whether these souls are liberal or conservative or somewhere in between—in precisely the same way.

What are our beliefs doing to us? It's a question worth asking. Are the things that we believe moving us toward the likeness of Christ or away from it? Are we becoming increasingly gentle, kind, loving, patient? Are we growing in self-control, peace, and joy? Are our lives characterized by a deep and abiding faithfulness? Are we leaving fear behind and being made perfect in love? Or are we becoming harsh, spiteful, fearful, anxious, impatient, and proud? It's not a straight line, I know. It's not as though right beliefs always and only produce the right kinds of human beings. We are rather more complicated creatures than that, alas. But they certainly help. And their absence can certainly hurt.

In the ninth chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus gives the Pharisees an assignment. Quoting the prophet Hosea, he says, "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice." It's an assignment the Pharisees struggled mightily with. It's an assignment that we still struggle with. Sacrifice comes easy to us. We are only too eager to sacrifice others on the altars of our ideological purity. Mercy is the harder road. But it is mercy, I suspect, that will save our souls. In the receiving and, perhaps just as importantly, in the giving.

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