

Love that changes minds: The case for inconsistency

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [February 23, 2010](#) issue

The day after Christmas holds many possibilities for pastors, most of them involving the word *rest*. I do not typically book office hours on this day. Four years ago proved to be an exception. Bob and Linda called on Christmas Day, requesting an appointment. "Our daughter is home from college and we really need to talk with you as soon as possible." There was an urgency to their words.

We met in the late afternoon, Jenna in the armchair to my right, her parents on the couch to my left. There was no impulse toward small talk. Bob cut right to the chase. "Jenna has informed us this week that she is gay. We don't know where this is coming from. It caught both of us completely by surprise. She knows it is contrary to everything we hold dear as a family. It is not what the Bible professes. We don't know what to do to help her. That's why we're here."

Mom cried softly. Jenna sat numb and expressionless, as if hit by a Mack truck. Dad's eyes had the look of a prisoner pleading for release. The icy air that marked Bob's opening words thawed only slightly over the next 30 minutes. Jenna offered no more than a few sentences the entire time. She appeared too hurt to speak.

My modest hope was to keep a door open for further conversation with these three. This was not the time to take apart and reassemble scripture. Nor was it the day to dissect the dynamics and history of this precious family. Our delicate conversation concluded on a fragile note, held together by nothing but a thin thread of hidden love. I watched the parents and daughter walk to their separate cars under the evening light. Their heads were bent over.

In the four years since that awkward conversation, something approximating a miracle of grace occurred. Parents and daughter love each other in a more unconditional fashion than some of us learn in a lifetime. Linda has become an advocate for helping others understand homosexuality less as a hypothetical argument or position paper and more as a realm involving love for all of God's

children. “How can you hate an orientation?” she is fond of saying. For his part, Bob has reordered his biblical her meneutic to be more Jesus-centric than he previously considered appropriate. Jenna loves to come home.

This family’s journey from brokenness to new life is but one example of a trait we do well to cherish—being open to having one’s mind changed. The subject matter may be a political issue or a social convention. It may be a faith topic or a scriptural perspective. It may involve a situation of family struggle. Reexamining old assumptions need not herald a personal weakness. The willingness to question long-held assumptions becomes an opportunity. The freedom to admit error or misjudgment may trigger a whole renewal of faith.

College philosophy taught me a principle that too quickly became an unalterable doctrine: consistency is a virtue. Who wants to hear a friend say, “You’re inconsistent”? Such words grind like sand in the gears of personal integrity. Of course consistency counts, on certain matters at least. I might say, for example: God is love. I happen to be a child of this love. And my love for others is both desired and expected by this God of love. Beyond such basic claims, however, there is a lot of wiggle room. Changing one’s mind can be beautiful, especially as our perspective on love expands.

When George W. Bush nominated Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court, the president’s own words may have doomed the nomination: “I know her well enough to be able to say that she’s not going to change, that 20 years from now she’ll be the same person . . . I don’t want to put somebody on the bench who is this way today, and changes. That’s not what I’m interested in.”

One could argue, to the contrary, that the unpredictable opinions of the justices who strive to interpret contemporary issues against the backdrop of a historic constitution are critical to the court’s dynamism. The late chief justice Earl Warren once noted that he could not imagine how someone “could be on the court and not change his views substantially over a period of years . . . for change you must if you are to do your duty on the Supreme Court.”

If I could take college philosophy all over again, I’d challenge myself and my classmates to avoid glorifying the idea of consistency. I’d speak more on the beauty of reexamining old assumptions. I’d call to mind the time when a belligerent young man stormed at Mahatma Gandhi saying, “You have no integrity. Last week I heard

you say one thing; today you are saying something entirely different. How can you justify such vacillation?" To which Gandhi replied, "It is quite simple. I have learned something since last week."

Our reluctance to change our minds on subjects dear to our hearts may have roots extending all the way back to Aristotle and his understanding of God. Aristotle suggested that God is immutable or unchanging—incapable of being altered by the affairs of the world. If we admire and love this God, then it stands to reason that we will want to imitate God's consistency in our own thinking and doing.

Yet there is a complication to this line of thinking: God appears ready and willing to change God's own mind. In spite of our obsession with God's steady powers of omniscience, the Bible indicates that God is actually open to reconsidering God's behavior.

When God's wrath burns hot because of gross idolatry among the Hebrew people, Moses implores God to alter course. "And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (Exod. 32:14). When God forms a swarm of locusts to devastate the land, Amos pleads for mercy, and the Lord relents: "It will not happen" (Amos 7:3). When God saw the Ninevites choosing a whole new course for their lives, "God changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring" (Jonah 3:10).

What inspires this change of divine heart and mind? It is love. Love has a way of bringing dogged certainty to its knees. It can soften an otherwise calcified heart. There are things love will not do, places love will not invade, and utterances love will not speak. If God is love, then it makes sense that God prefers behaviors that best express love.

To appreciate the depth of this truth, we only have to look at our own relationships of love. Where love is nurtured deeply, changing one's mind for the sake of someone we love becomes more likely. Ask any married couple whose togetherness is steeped in love and you're apt to hear of hundreds, if not thousands, of changed perspectives that each has adopted because of their shared love. Or ask Bob, Linda, and Jenna about their last four years. They will be quick to note the impact of God's love on their struggle and the role that their abiding love for one another played. In the end, love trumped consistency and minds were changed in beautiful ways.