

# Asking a Question You Don't Have the Answer To

August 24, 2014

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

What might it mean for you to have your mind changed and what are the chances of it? Mahatma Gandhi was confronted once by a fellow citizen and follower who criticized him for changing his mind. "Just last week I heard you ascribe to something opposite of what you said today. How can you do that? I thought you were a man of conviction!" "Simple," said the great leader, "you see between then and now I learned something and that has changed my mind."

I learned something and that has changed my mind. What might it mean for you to have your mind changed and what are the chances of it?

Antony Flew, the paragon of modern philosophical atheism, late in his life published a book entitled, *There is a God*, in which the great proponent of naturalism confessed to his own intellectual blindness. He could not see what was right in front of him. "Over the last two decades," the philosopher wrote, "my whole framework of thought has been in a state of migration." All a matter, he continued, of following Plato's paradigm – "Follow the argument wherever it leads."

"Follow the argument wherever it leads." What if you did and it caused you to change your mind?

One of the things we applaud in this day and age of ours are people of conviction. People who stake out a position and stick to it. A lot of the books on leadership you find in the bookstore will

include chapters on principles and conviction. Coming up with a plan and sticking to it. Seeing the world in a certain way and living into it. Developing a strategy and working hard to convince people of it. Arriving at a position and planting your feet firmly in it. Lord knows there is a lot to be said for people of conviction. We could stand, perhaps more people of conviction. Because conviction leads to passion and passion leads to inspiration and inspiration leads to courage and courage leads to bravery and bravery leads to the chances increasing of the world being changed for the better. So hear me when I say that conviction can be and often is a good thing. The great heroes of our history were people of conviction. The great saints of our faith were people of conviction. So much is at stake when it comes to our conviction. So much of ourselves we pour into our tightly held opinions.

But conviction carries with it its own weakness. Those two words together seem like an oxymoron – but conviction carries with it its own weakness. And the weakness conviction carries with it – is the inability to have your mind changed. The inability to consider new information that could possibly put at risk your opinion. To follow the argument wherever it leads.

Some of us may remember the tragic crash of Eastern Airlines Flight 401 down in the Everglades back in 1972. A quite preventable tragedy – for upon their approach to the Miami airport the crew of the plane got fixated on an indicator that suggested something wrong with the landing gear – this was the problem they had to focus on to get that plane landed. And what they failed to notice while fixated on the one thing, occupied on the one thing, convicted about the one thing – was that the automatic pilot system had disconnected and that right outside their windows – right in front of them -- the earth was drawing up – and before they could do anything the plane crashed.

Conviction carries with it its own weakness.

Lyndon Johnson after leaving office was asked about the Vietnam War and part of what he said was this: “I never felt I had the luxury of reexamining my basic assumption. Once the decision to commit military force was made, all our energies were turned to vindicating that choice and finding a way to make it work.” Conviction carries with it its own weakness.

Most certainly the apostle Paul would attest to that. His was a life of conviction. His was a life of pursuing an iron clad position for himself. When he writes to the Philippians he says, "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews,; as to the law a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless." Sounds like a man of conviction. But it is in the very next sentence that Paul says, "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." For how was Paul to know that from this firmly staked position there was something still yet to be learned? How was Paul to predict that the voice of the Risen One would come to him in the blinding light of the Damascus Road? How was he to ever imagine that there would come a day when he would sit at the feet of new teachers, teaching a new thing and that he would have his mind changed? And not just tweaked! Not just adjusted a little! But to take on an opinion opposite of what he had held weeks before!! Holy smokes – if that were to happen up on Capitol Hill we'd call the man a phony, a traitor, a flip-flop, a spineless politician. MSNBC and Fox News would have his hide!

So it might help us to understand what Paul is trying to say in these opening verses of Romans Chapter 12 (perhaps my favorite chapter of the apostle's) – "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." Present your bodies as a living sacrifice – being transformed by the renewing of your minds. In other words, this merciful God is eager for you to present yourself – including your conviction -- in order for your mind to be renewed in order for you to discern what is the will of God in order for you to understand what is good and acceptable and perfect. In other words, what are the chances of your mind being changed? Little chance, Paul would have said before making his way down the Damascus Road. Little chance.

And so maybe it helps us to understand then the line that follows – “For by the grace given me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.” Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to think. To the Philippians Paul says, In humility regard others as better than yourselves. In other words, Do not imagine that there is not a conviction within you that doesn’t need changing.

Can you imagine that? That there is a conviction in you that might need changing?

Hard I suppose it was for the young ruler who came to Jesus with the ultimate spiritual question, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Good question. And do you hear what Jesus first says, “Good? Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” In other words – do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. In other words, we’re all here to discover the will and purposes of God and if anyone thinks, including me, that they’ve got that figured out – such is one less holy and acceptable sacrifice to God. And so what follows is a run through on the ten commandments – adultery, murder, stealing, lying, honoring your father and mother --- check, check, check, check, check, says the young ruler. You see, Jesus I have developed a good argument, I am firm in my opinion, I have checked all the boxes, I have staked out my position. Of course you have, Jesus says, but there’s one you jumped over. There’s one you didn’t quite consider. That while you’ve been focused on the landing gear, you haven’t paid attention to the automatic pilot. There’s one you’ve ignored while focusing on all the others – and the earth is rushing up at you. What could this be? Oh, Jesus says, it’s the first one! You shall have no other gods before me. But good news, there’s a way to fix it – sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me. And now, all of a sudden the rich young ruler realizes he’s made the big mistake – the mistake he was taught not to make way back in the first year of law school – Never ask a question you don’t already know the answer to! Don’t leave yourself open to the possibility of new and transforming information! Don’t put yourself in the position of having to change your mind. But that is where he put himself – and now there is this crisis. This crisis of having to let go of a

cherished opinion ... a cherished position ... a cherished lifestyle. And so Mark says that the man grieved – because if there was any part of his mind that wasn't going to change it was that one.

You see, Jesus says, how hard it is to change your mind? You see how hard it is for rich folks to enter the kingdom of heaven – easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom.

Now here is the crazy thing – there is so much of me that does not want that passage to be about me. Do you know what I mean? It's like that Carly Simon song of a long time ago – "You're so vain, you probably think this song is about you." Truth is ... I am so set in my ways, I am so certain of my life, I am so convicted of my convictions – I want to think this story of Jesus and the ruler is about someone else! Do you know what I mean? Because the truth is I don't have to look long and far to convince myself – that relative to so many, oh boy, I'm living the life of a pauper. That I have no other gods before me. No siree. That somehow I've got this thing figured out and that when it comes to the changing of minds – God doesn't need to waste his time on me. And then I realize that so often I read the Bible with questions I think I already know the answer to. Like reading a novel for the tenth time – I already know how it turns out – and somehow when I read the Bible it all turns out to agree with me!!! Do you know what I mean? I don't get surprised anymore. There's nothing left in this little mind to change. But as little as my mind is – I can't imagine that to be true. Is it true for you? That there is nothing left in the Bible for us to get surprised about? Is it possible there are questions about our souls, our positions, our opinions, we don't know the answer to?

I remember a year or so after I got out of seminary – and there is probably not a more self-assured time in a pastor's ministry than the first year out of seminary – you've got three years of school behind you and you know it all – and that's when I picked up a book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer called *The Cost of Discipleship* and I read it and when I finished it I said to myself, "Oh dear, either he's wrong and I'm right. Or I'm wrong and he's right." He had presented to me such a radically different view of discipleship – one I had never considered – that I realized something was going to

have to give. Either forget what I just read – or somehow change something in here. And to be honest, it's been a tug of war ever since. The mind is a hard thing to change.

C.S Lewis in his early autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, recounts the events of his early years that first led him to throw away any faith and knowledge of God and then second conspired to open him up to a question he didn't know the answer to – what lies behind the experience of joy? And sure enough in pursuing the answer he was unaware of – following the argument wherever it led -- he found a surprise he could never have planned on – this God he had so proudly and vainly and honestly discarded turned out to be the answer to his question. But it's hard to have your mind changed. For so writes Lewis:

*That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divinity humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? The words "compel them to come in" have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but, properly understood, they plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.*

His compulsion is our liberation. For as Mark the Gospel writer would tell us of that rich young ruler – when Jesus looked at him with the answer he wasn't looking for – he looked at him, Mark says, and loved him. Let me with this answer love you, he says. Let me with this change of your mind love you, he says. Let me with this surprise teaching give you the eternal life. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. It's our only hope, isn't it? Even those who don't think this sermon is about them – it's our only hope to hear the answer we did not know before we asked – is to see that the one who speaks it is the one who looks at us and loves us.