

**Kelly A. Fryer. Reclaiming the L Word: Renewing the Church
from Its Lutheran Core.**

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Chapter 1. In Defense of Dogma

DOGMA

Dogma conjures up images of shadowy, looming authority figures standing over straight rows of students cowering under the threat of a whack by an old wooden ruler: “Believe this or else.”

At best, Dogma is the name of your least favorite aunt, the one who pinched you really hard on the cheek when she said hello, and gave you a lecture, when she said goodbye, about maybe having better manners next time. Do you remember what your Dad would say as soon as that aunt of yours would leave? “Come on now kids,” he’d say, “Remember she means well.” And I sort of hate to admit it now, but he was right. She did.

Dogma is, simply defined, a set of principles that we believe to be true. It is a “head” thing, not a “heart” thing. And a lot of us, before we do anything else, need to get our heads on straight. We need to know what we think – about God and about our faith, about the world and about ourselves, and about what it means to say that we are the church and that we have a job to do.

TURN YOUR HEAD

So, do you know who you are...and what you stand for? If you’re like a lot of people I know, you may not be sure how to answer that question. **Some of us are pretty clear about what we DON’T believe. But we would be stumped if somebody asked us to sum up what we DO believe.**

In fact, this has been a problem in the Christian community for as long as anybody can remember. The apostle Paul clashed with the apostle Peter for refusing to take a firm stand on the biggest issue of their day. The controversy back then was about whether or not you had to be Jewish before you became a follower of Jesus. For a while, Peter said, “No, you don’t.” He accepted those who weren’t Jewish and even ate with them. But Jesus’ brother James disagreed. He thought you had to be Jewish first. When some of James’ friends saw what Peter was doing, Peter got scared and stopped doing it, afraid he’d get in trouble. When he came to Antioch, Paul shouted, “Stand somewhere! Know who you are!”

Paul was right on the money when he said that knowing who you are and what you stand for is important. There might not be a more important thing for those of us who are

Christians -- who also happen to be Lutheran – to be thinking about today. In fact, **the only thing that vibrant, healthy congregations have in common is that they know who they are and who God is calling them to be. They are so clear about it that they are willing to do whatever it takes to be faithful to that call.**

Not long ago I met a woman theologian who is also a martial-arts expert. “I have learned something very important from the martial arts,” she said. “If your head hits the floor, your body will follow.” Then she drove her point home: “So, if you want your body to go somewhere... **turn your head.**”

In other words, our actions will be informed by the principles that guide our thinking. Where the head leads, the body will follow. It begins with knowing what we think about things. It means having a grasp on what we believe to be true about ourselves and about God and about our life together as Christians. For those of us who are Lutheran, it also means to be clear about what it means to be Lutheran.

If our congregations are struggling with this issue, it is in large part because WE are struggling. **Nothing will change in our churches unless it changes in US.**

WRESTLING WITH THE WORD // THINKING THINGS THROUGH

1. Read Nehemiah 1: 1-4

Nehemiah was working as a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, far from home, when he heard that his people were in danger back in Jerusalem. He knew he had to DO something about this, but he did something else first. What was it, and what difference did it make?

2. Read Matthew 16: 13-16

Jesus knew he was headed for trouble in Jerusalem, and he wanted to get his disciples ready for it. Right before he told them what was coming, he asked a very important question that forced Peter to articulate what it was he believed to be true. What was the question? What was the response? What difference did the question make then? What difference does it make today?

3. How is it possible for a whole group of people – a family, congregation or country – to agree on “the most important things.”? What difference does it make when a group shares a clear set of beliefs in common?

4. Is it more important to THINK first and then act? Or the other way around?

5. Describe a time when you were involved in a conflict with someone you loved, and you later realized that what you were fighting about didn’t really matter that much after all? What would have happened if, in the heat of the argument, someone had remembered the “big picture” ... and all of the important things you have in common?