

**Kelly A. Fryer. Reclaiming the L Word: Renewing the Church
from Its Lutheran Core.
(Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2003).**

Chapter 2. A Confession

A DEFINITION

Grace is at the heart of the best sort of “bottom line” definition I have ever heard of what it means to be a Lutheran. I wish I could tell you from whom I first heard this definition, but I am not sure. My best recollection is that it was a visiting professor during my first year of seminary. After a long lecture one day, he must have known that we weren’t listening any more, because he suddenly slapped his notebook shut and stopped talking.

Before he left the room, he picked up a piece of chalk and went to the board. He drew a gigantic ARROW, pointing straight down, stood back, and said: “If you understand that, you understand everything you need to know about what it means to be a Christian ... who also happens to be a Lutheran.” And then he left the room.



We just sat there staring at it, this enormous stark ARROW pointing straight down. And then I thought the most logical thing I could think, given everything that had just happened: “He thinks we’re all going to hell!”

The next time we gathered for class, he began by drawing the same arrow on the board. This time, as he began to speak, he had our full attention. “Here’s what this means,” he said. “God always comes down. God *always* comes down. There is never anything that we can ever do to turn that arrow around and make our way UP to God. God came down in Jesus. And God still comes down, in the bread and in the wine, in the water, and in the fellowship of believers. **God ALWAYS comes down.**”

THE STARTING POINT

Church leaders who lead the Reformation in Europe 500 years ago had to help people sort out the things that really matter from the things that don’t. They had to decide what to do – now that they were Lutherans – about all the traditions and rituals they were used to keeping as Catholics. Should we fast during Lent or not? Should we have statues in the church or not? They decided that anything that helps people meet the God who always comes down, is IN; anything that absolutely gets in the way of that is OUT; and everything else is *adiaphora* (a-dee-A-fora), things that don’t matter all that much. In other words, even back then, it was clear that **a lot of the rituals and practices that**

make up our life together as a church just aren't that critical. *They* are not what really matters.

Jesus came down here and went to the cross for us, so that we could be free enough to live again. This is the bottom line of what it means to be a Lutheran. It is the framework for everything else we say and do. It is the starting point.

FIVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Our church council decided that we needed to clarify who and what we are as a congregation. As resources, we used the Scriptures, the ancient creeds, the Lutheran Confessions, and our rich heritage as Protestant Reformers. We agreed that the framework for the whole conversation would be our understanding of the God who always comes down to set us free.

The result of this effort was five guiding principles, easily remembered and simple to understand, that are a clear and full summary of what is uniquely Lutheran:

- 1. Jesus is Lord**
- 2. Everyone is Welcome**
- 3. Love Changes People**
- 4. Everybody Has Something to Offer**
- 5. The World Needs What We Have**

These principles articulate clearly what is essential. We believe that these principles are faithful to the Scriptures and to our confessional heritage. They are our way of answering the question “Who are we?”

WRESTLING WITH THE WORD // THINKING THINGS THROUGH

1. Read Romans 3:21-28

The Christians in Rome were of varied backgrounds. Paul wanted them to willingly let go of all the cultural and traditional stuff that was in the way of their ability to move forward in mission, and embrace the “bottom line.” What was the bottom line as Paul saw it?

2. Read Psalm 25

Martin Luther's rediscovery of the God who always comes down began as he read the Old Testament, and particularly as he prayed through the Psalms attributed to David. What is David asking in this Psalm? How does he know God will answer?

3. What do you think of the statement “God always comes down”?

4. Who first introduced you to the God you know? Who has been your teacher or mentor?

5. What is your initial response to the five guiding principles? Do they need to be re-worked to fit our situation?