

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

Chapter 5. Love Changes People

Is it just me, or is the world getting meaner? And sometimes I think I see this mean-spiritedness reflected in some corners of the Christian church. Do you see it, too?

LOVE Changes People

In a bathroom stall in a restaurant, I saw this graffiti message: “Jesus is coming back soon. Will you be ready?” Apparently, there are some Christians who think this approach – just scare the heck out of people – actually works. I think they mean well, but somebody ought to tell them that it is God’s *love* that makes the difference for people. *Not* the law. *Not* a list of rules that you better follow or else. *Not* whacking people upside the head with a Bible.

The law, Paul says, IS important. I don’t mean to suggest it isn’t. But people aren’t really *changed* by rulebooks or lectures or laws. **What really changes people over the long run, what makes people different, what moves people surely and steadily along the path of faith and holiness and hope ... is LOVE, the love of God through Jesus Christ.**

Sometimes the way our church has done things has scared people away before they have had a chance to meet the One who welcomes them. We haven’t always meant that to be the case. But that’s what has happened, usually by accident – but sometimes, maybe, on purpose – because of something we’ve said or done, or something we’ve failed to do.

This is why Guiding Principle #3 is so important: Love Changes People. It keeps right up in front of us the challenge to carry out in our lives – and in our churches – what we know to be true in our hearts. Without apology, in rather radical fashion, we declare the OPPOSITE of what everything in our legalistic, take-no-prisoners culture tells us is true. We have been met by the Lord Jesus, who has welcomed us with open arms. And we declare that it has been his welcome – and his LOVE! – which has made everything new.

Love CHANGES People

Love really does change everything. The Bible is full of stories about people like Zacchaeus and Paul whose lives were transformed when the God who loves them met them where and as they were. These people found themselves, as a result of this meeting, doing things they never even imagined were possible.

Those of us who stand on grace need to be very careful not to give the idea that life in Jesus is all mushy and lazy and easy, just because it is centered and grounded in love. No way! This is hard work. When Luther traveled the countryside in the days following the Reformation and discovered how many lazy, mushy Christians there were, he was beside himself. He went home and wrote a couple of very important books that would be used for centuries to teach the faith because, frankly, no one back then was bothering to learn it. That's where the Large and the Small Catechism came from.

I wonder what it would be like if we really expected something to happen in our lives – and in our churches – because of the love and the welcome we have given though Jesus. How many of us are really doing all the growing, learning, and stretching we can?

FOLLOWING JESUS INTO DEEPER WATER

Jesus loved people just as they were. But it was often, literally, within moments of that first meeting when he was inviting them to just drop everything and follow him. That's how Peter found himself climbing out of a tiny fishing boat and out onto a stormy sea in deep water. If we *didn't* know that Jesus loved us so much, his call to follow him into deeper waters might sound more like a threat than an invitation. But we *do* know it.

The journey into deeper waters will look a little different for each of us, depending on where our starting point is. You might be a “wader”, a “swimmer”, a “deep sea diver”, or even a “lifeguard.” Regardless of which you are, **you know that the whole focus of our mission, as Christians, is all of those people who are “still ashore.”** They are people we may not even have met yet. They are our neighbors.

None of us moves out into deeper water because someone yelled at us or threatened us or whacked us upside the head with the Bible. Knowing we are unconditionally loved by a God who always comes down to set us free is what gives us the confidence and courage we need to go places we would never otherwise dare to go. **It is LOVE that changes us.**

WRESTLING WITH THE WORD // THINKING THINGS THROUGH

1. Read Matthew 9:27-31.

Who does Jesus meet in this story? What does Jesus do? What is the response?

2. Read Acts 9:1-22.

What about Paul's story makes it an extreme example of God who comes down in love?

3. Ever been “whacked upside the head” by a person with a Bible? How did it feel?

4. Describe a time when you have seen somebody's life changed by an encounter with love.

5. Where are you on the spiritual “depth gauge”? What is your church doing to help you, and others, follow Jesus into deeper waters?