

Rev. Cawthon-Freels's new book speaks to the heart of struggling Queer folk in traditional church settings where scripture is too often placed above G-d. This idolatry of scripture has made it imperative that individuals like Kali research and reveal ancient truths that through the millennia have been misused to wound, alienate, and kill Queer people in the name of G-d and Jesus. This book is in every sense a life raft for the Queer Christian seeking some meaningful connection to scripture that is life-giving, liberating and affirming.

Using sound research and wonderful personal sources, Kali walks with the reader through what we know of as the Clobber Passages with a purpose to de-thorn the scriptures and reclaim them in the name of love from the Church's long history of homophobia. I think the readers will be educated on the truth behind these passages, often putting them at odds with their family's interpretation and their church's, but that is necessary if the Queer individual is grow in their faith. They can no longer simply swallow what is served to them without asking the hard contextual questions like who wrote this, who were they writing to, what did this word in Hebrew or Greek really mean during these ancient times?

What I appreciate most about this book is Kali's attention to the humanity of Queer folk. She offers insights into subjects such as chosen family and gender to give the reader context to locate themselves wherever they are along their own journey as a Queer person. This emphasis places scripture where it should be, as a sacred but fallible resource to point to the great mystery of our Creator. Kali resists making scripture or its interpretation an idol which allows the Queer Christian to learn about scripture without feeling as though it defines who they are to a loving G-d.

I pray this text and Kali's incredible witness serve as a balm to the wounds of the Queer community who carry the deep scars of a sick theology. Reclamation can bring liberation and healing.

Rev. Gator Blanchard  
*Associate Pastor, Unity Fellowship Owensboro, KY*

Reclamation is the book all progressive churches need to read together! In it, Kali pushes beyond the important work of deconstruction (that we often get stuck in) and moves us toward building something new, generative, and redemptive. Kali interweaves careful scholarship, gentle spirituality, and the perfect dose of pop culture references! What emerges is a guide that dares us to think creatively and generatively about scripture that has done so much damage to so many people, and what these off-limits texts may have to offer us after all. The personal insight and

vulnerability offered by Kali and by the authors of each of the “interludes” (brief essays by other LGBTQIA+ Christians) are a total gift to the church and the world. This is a courageous work of love that I highly recommend!

Rev. Natalie Webb  
*Senior Pastor, University Baptist Church, Austin, TX*  
*Cofounder, Nevertheless She Preached*

# RECLAMATION

A Queer Pastor's Guide  
to Finding Spiritual Growth in the  
Passages Used to Harm Us

KALI CAWTHON-FREELS

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A huge thanks to my contributors: Robert Arnáu, Autem Carter, Josh Carpenter, Haley Cawthon-Freels, Christy Dinkins, Grayson Hester, Ve Ivey, Teri King, Will Root, Cody J. Sanders, and Amanda West Wilkerson. Your stories elevated this devotional to something far more Spirit-infused than I could have created on my own. The way that the Divine speaks through each of you is a gift, and I am humbled that you would share it with me. Now, we get to share your gift with the world.

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Thank you to my besties, my forever gal-pal-sister-friends Amanda and Faith. I am always thankful for the family you are to me; that support and love has never been more evident.

And finally, thank you to the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Thank you for putting me in a position to bring these words together. I pray that they bless others as much as writing them blessed me.

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## Foreword

Between the ages of six and ten, I played church in my backyard in a small chapel that my dad and paternal grandfather built for me, wearing a tiny robe and stole my paternal grandmother sewed for me, often accompanied by my maternal grandfather, who would assist me with services. Throughout childhood and adolescence, I rarely missed a Sunday in my actual small-town church either. It was a place of rich intergenerational relationship, joy, and beautiful music. In high school I carried a pocket-sized New Testament around with me in my jeans and never went to sleep at night without reading a passage of scripture. I went to college to study religion and seminary to prepare for ministry and graduate school to become a practical theologian.

I've loved the church and the Bible and the Christian tradition for as long as I can remember. I felt called into the vocation of ministry by a sense of the Spirit's luring that was affirmed by my congregation and nurtured by the ministers in my life.

For almost the entirety of this love affair with the church and my devoted practice of faith, I was also aware of my same-sex attraction, long before I knew any terms to describe my "sexual orientation." No one made a very big deal about "homosexuality" in the pulpit of my childhood church, but there was clarity on my part, nonetheless. I had an intuitive sense that others wouldn't respond well to this part of my sense of self. As I got older, I heard the message a little more clearly: this isn't something that a young man pursuing a call to ministry could do, could be, could even talk about.

For a long time, when it came to the intersection of my sexuality and faith, it was just me and the Bible, me and Jesus, me in prayerful exploration of my embodied life situated within this long tradition of faith. I needed to work things out, but I had to do so on my own. (A book like *Reclamation* would have really helped back then.)

Today, as a queer Baptist pastor, higher education chaplain, writer, and professor of pastoral theology and care, I hear this question a lot: Why did you stay in the church as a queer person? Not how did you navigate the tensions, or what resources helped you practice your faith as a queer person, or who supported you along the way, but why? It seems unfathomable to many—queer and cis/straight alike—that one could even find a reason to stay within a tradi-

tion that has so systematically and scrupulously worked to undo you and your queer siblings in faith.

To some degree, everyone—not just LGBTQIA+ people—should ask that question of their own life of faith: *Why do you stick with it?* Why continue to study the Bible knowing its long history of use in justifying varied forms of violence? Why continue to practice Christianity knowing its complicity in colonialism the world over? Why do you stay within a theological tradition that has been so frequently employed to sever our intimate relational ties to the larger web of life on an Earth now precipitously imperiled by human domination?

For queer people, staying in the church (or reinventing it), continuing to practice Christian faith (often with a carefully honed queer liberative lens), maintaining a devotional relationship with the text of scripture (sometimes after putting it down for a good long while) are not inevitabilities. It doesn't happen for us by getting caught in the cultural momentum or through acquiesce to the inertia of the status quo.

If you've never had to ask, "*Why do I stay in this church, denomination, or tradition?*" you've probably never experienced its more violent and violating edges. But queer people have. Those edges are hard to escape. When we stay—and it's understandably not something every LGBTQIA+ person is able to do—it's usually through some combination of prayerful discernment, diligent study, caring companionship, and faithful tenacity.

But staying is not the point. Living queer lives of faithfulness is an expression of beauty in the world. There's something of an art to it. There's no monolithic "queer Christianity." Nor should there be. We live our way into it, honing techniques and gathering treasures along the way that we can share with others. Queer liberation isn't just for LGBTQIA+ people, after all. It makes the life of faith better for everyone who has ears to hear and eyes to see and hearts prepared to learn and grow.

There are several practices for living at the intersection of LGBTQIA+ embodiment and Christian faith that are beautifully exemplified in this book, so carefully constructed by Kali Cawthon-Freels. I want to be sure you notice them as you read this incredible book:

### Asking New, More Beautiful Questions

You don't always have to answer the questions you're given. I learned that after several years of doing the exhausting work that other people wanted me to do in order to justify my queer Christian existence and ministerial practice. I began to recognize that I had my own questions to ask, and those pursuits of inquiry were far more life-giving than the worn-out old questions of whether I



could belong, or be ordained, or be in a same-sex relationship, etc. I could ask theological questions about the lessons of queer love and the life of queer faithfulness and what the Bible has to teach us about a whole lot more than where to draw the boundaries on who's in and who's out.

Rev. Cawthon-Freels and her LGBTQIA+ companions whose voices are represented in this book exhibit a love for the Bible. She looks upon these passages of scripture and develops meanings that the religious gatekeepers of the cishet status quo couldn't perceive in the texts. While many have looked at these texts and said, "Clearly, the message is that LGBTQIA+ people are living lives of sin." And others have carefully considered their context and said, "Not so fast! They don't quite say what you think they say about LGBTQIA+ people."

*Reclamation* doesn't stop there, however. This book asks bigger, more beautiful questions about these texts of scripture and about the life of faith for LGBTQIA+, straight, and cisgender people alike. Asking new questions results in faithful explorations we couldn't have imagined while being navigated by the restricting dictates of the old, well-worn queries.

## Reclaiming Sources of Spiritual Sustenance on Our Own Terms

The souls of queer folk have long been sustained by the same sources of sacred wisdom used against us. But when we reclaim these sources of spiritual sustenance—whether prayer (after we've been told to "pray the gay away") or the Bible (after we've been told what it supposedly says about us)—we don't do so with naïveté. We know the source's power to harm, and we recognize its power to heal.

The Bible is one such source of harm and healing, and LGBTQIA+ people have (re)engaged scripture with a queer lens for a long time now. Rev. Cawthon-Freels takes this one bold step further: not just (re)claiming the Bible as a source of spiritual growth and faith development for LGBTQIA+ Christians, but pressing on to recover something of spiritual significance even in those passages used to "clobber" queer Christians.

This is a queer theological power move that restores the authority so frequently stripped from LGBTQIA+ people to read and interpret the Bible in its fullness with the fullness of our queer lives in view. Learn from this technique! It could save your faith, or maybe even your life.

## Recognizing Queer Lives as Sacred Sources of Wisdom

Finally, in foregrounding the narratives of ten other LGBTQIA+ people interspersed throughout her skillful readings of scripture, Rev. Cawthon-Freels makes one thing explicitly clear: LGBTQIA+ lives are sacred sources of wisdom. That is the ultimate act of reclamation in this text: reclaiming and proclaiming that the lives of LGBTQIA+ people are sacred, that we are beloved of God, that the church has more to learn from us than its establishment leaders dare to admit.

Queer folk are not out to “belong” within church structures that have marginalized us, or to finagle our way out of being condemned by the Bible, or to sit quietly by in self-satisfaction once we’ve been offered a place at the table. We’re not even out to change the church. We’re out to change the *whole world*. That is the calling of followers of Jesus: to realize a relational kingdom forged in the shape of compassion, peace, and justice for every inhabitant of the Earth.

Blessings to you on that journey.

The Rev. Cody J. Sanders, Ph.D. (he/him/his)  
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# Introduction

## The Hot Stove

Growing up in the South, I learned many quippy sayings intended to quickly teach a lesson—short, sharp, Southern proverbs, if you will. “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.” “Don’t bite off more than you can chew.” “Don’t put all of your eggs in one basket.” Of those quips, one has stuck with me the most over the years: “you only touch a hot stove once.”

I don’t think the lesson in that last proverb is terribly hidden here: if something or someone hurts you, you ought not interact with that person or thing again. But the way that my friends and family said that phrase indicated that there was another, unspoken lesson: if something hurts you, you’d be a fool to touch it again.

It’s natural to run from things that hurt us. That survival instinct is hardwired into our DNA. But we often confuse harm with discomfort, so we end up avoiding important conversations simply because we don’t want to be uncomfortable. That rationale is why many pastors stay away from challenging parts of the Bible altogether. It wasn’t until I was in seminary that I discovered the stories of the rape and murder of the Levite’s concubine, the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter, and many other challenging narratives in the Bible. On one hand, I was shocked by the content of the stories. How could a book describing the love of God be so violent? How could a book about living like Jesus contain so much immorality? On the other hand, I was disappointed in my pastors. Why had none of my pastors ever discussed these passages? Weren’t there lessons to be learned here as well? I assume that their fear of these passages (or, perhaps, their fear of mishandling them) led them to steer as far away from those passages as they could. Besides, there was the whole rest of the Bible to explore, right?

For many LGBTQIA+ Christians and allies, the infamous “clobber” passages (the handful of passages used by religious conservatives to demonize LGBTQIA+ people) elicit a similar response: stay far, far away. These verses haven’t been used to make us uncomfortable; they’ve been used to cause us deep harm. How many times have we heard pastors scream from the pulpit that the sin of Sodom was sodomy? How many times have we had family members

quote Leviticus and tell us that two men can't lie together? How many times have we heard well-meaning friends combat our lived experience with, "But what about Romans 1?" Some of us have had family members cut us off or kick us out of our homes, citing these verses as their justification for doing so. Others of us have heard these verses cited as the reasons why we couldn't participate in leadership at church and the reason why those churches denied us sacraments like marriage, Communion, baptism, or ordination. These conversations have left deep scars, wounds that we haven't forgotten. For some of us, those wounds have been deep enough to keep us out of the Bible altogether.

Even amidst the ever-increasing resources that prove that those passages aren't about same-sex relationships or gender expression, LGBTQIA+ persons and affirming pastors are hesitant to discuss these verses in small groups or preach them from pulpits. These passages are our hot stove: touch, and we're afraid we'll get burned again. If we do touch those verses, it's simply for the purpose of proving they have nothing to do with demonizing consensual same-sex relationships or expressions of gender identity. People like James Brownson, Matthew Vines, Justin Lee, Austen Hartke, and countless others have done tremendous work in this area. These voices have been essential in moving the conversation about LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the church forward, but I fear we've reached a plateau. We're stuck in this rut of saying, "That's not what these scriptures are about." If we stay here, we run the risk of losing any lessons to be learned from these texts. We can't keep defining these passages by what they aren't; we have to discover what they are.

## A Shift

In the past couple of years, the needle has started to shift on LGBTQIA+ Christians' openness to scripture. Several LGBTQIA+ Christians and allies alike have striven to create Bible study materials that are affirming, inclusive, and true to scripture. Their tendency, however, has been to either avoid those aforementioned verses like the plague or to highlight the perspectives mentioned above (to indicate what they aren't about). Why would a progressive Bible study use verses that have been harmful to LGBTQIA+ lives for decades? Why go beyond the "these verses aren't about same-sex relationships or gender expression" dialogue? As LGBTQIA+ Christians and allies continue to return to the church and seek resources for spiritual growth, I invite us to ask a different question:

What does it mean to use these verses as tools for our spiritual growth and well-being? My aim is not to discuss how these verses are not intended to prove that being LGBTQIA+ is a sinful choice frowned upon by God. As I mentioned

above, there are already several fantastic resources available that do that work justice. Instead, we will journey together to reclaim the lessons those texts have to offer us. For that reason, I will operate from a paradigm that assumes a fully affirming and inclusive theology from the start, as well as one that assumes my audience is operating from there as well. If you are not there theologically and have questions about how countless people have made this jump, I have included a list of resources at the end of this book that you may find helpful. This includes avoiding overly deep dives into translational nuances about specific words in some of the verses. For the ease of the reader, I scratch the surface on some of those word studies, but only for the sake of sticking to our task of finding the life-giving messages waiting for us in the text. For a more robust look at those translational nuances and deep word studies, I encourage you to reference the resources listed at the end of this book.

### How to Use This Book

In this book, each “clobber” passage will have one chapter assigned to it, with the exception of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, which I paired together. All passages of scripture I quote will be from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted. I also encourage you to have your own Bible handy while you read so you can examine the text for yourself. At the start of each chapter, I’ll begin with a story that will ease us into the theme of the verse. After that, we will briefly explore any contextual knowledge that will help us better understand the world of the authors. Then, we will focus on devotional-style reflections upon the text. After the reflection, I will leave several questions for you to consider as you examine how these verses provide spiritual instruction and comfort—yes, even comfort—to your own life. I will conclude each chapter with a prayer inspired by the theme of the verse and invite you to pray it as well.

In between each chapter, you’ll find brief testimonies from other LGBTQIA+ Christians about what it means for them as queer Christians to reclaim scripture reading as a spiritual practice. Our community is diverse, and there are nuances in our sub-communities that each part of our community understands better than other parts do. I also believe that in order to better understand the Divine, we have to surround ourselves with as many people and perspectives as possible. If you surround yourself with people who only share your experiences, then you’ve surrounded yourself with mirrors and only see the same glimpse of God you see in yourself.

These interludes are vulnerable and thoughtful. I’m excited for you to hear the experiences of these fellow believers.

My hope is that this format will allow you to be as private or communal as you want to be in this process of rediscovering these passages. For some this will require breaks in between chapters—maybe for days or weeks—and perhaps you would prefer to meditate on those verses in solitude. That’s fine, and I want to encourage you to do that. For others, you may want to audibly process the reflection questions with a group of trusted believers who are struggling with these verses the same way you are. If that’s you, then embrace that feeling and start a small group on the topic. Maybe you want to journal about how a particular testimony resonates with your lived experience and you’d rather do that alone. Or perhaps a mixture of solitude and group discussion helps you absorb these lessons the most. No matter what method you choose, I want you to feel comfortable using this book in the way that enriches your soul the most. There is no wrong way to go about the process of reclamation.

### But ... The Stove Is Hot

At this point, many of you may be wondering ... well, why? When we have a sacred scripture filled with thousands of instructive verses, why should LGBTQIA+ people and their allies even care about these? Why look for guidance in verses that have done nothing but cause pain to—burn—us and our loved ones for so long? Why bother?

Well, because I’m a sucker for redemption.

From January 2017 to July 2018, I had the pleasure to help my colleague and friend Rev. Adam Gray start a fully inclusive church plant in St Petersburg, Florida. In the early days, when the church plant was more of a vision than a reality, we sat at a table bouncing around ideas for names. Adam proposed the name Redeeming Church<sup>1</sup>—and I was hooked. While I loved the double entendre it presented (the fact that church needs to be redeemed for those whom the Church hurt juxtaposed against the reality that we believed we were actively redeeming what church can be), I loved the name because it aligned with my beliefs about the Gospel. As I would preach often in that congregation and many times since, I deeply believe that redemption is not a one-and-done deal; it’s a never-ending process.

God has redeemed us. God will redeem us.

God is redeeming us even now, again and again and again.

If God is in the business of continually redeeming us, then I believe God has to be in the business of continually redeeming God’s misused, misquoted, cherry-picked Word. If God wasn’t in the business of redeeming God’s Word, then God would have stopped speaking through the Bible long ago—when it was used to defend slavery; when it was used to legalize segregation; when it was

used to vilify interracial marriage; when it was used to justify the Holocaust; when it is used to promote violence against women; when it is used to deny sanctuary to refugees; and now, when it is used to harm LGBTQIA+ persons.

If God wasn't in the business of redeeming God's Word, the only responsible Christian response would have been to ditch the Bible a long, long time ago.

So yes, the stove is hot, but it wasn't being used properly. When a stove is used improperly, it becomes something terribly dangerous. It can cause serious harm to the one using it and anyone in proximity to that person. Improperly used stoves have been the culprits of upturned lives, destroying any safety or security someone has. Not only that, improperly used stoves cause deep burns and, if the damage is deep enough, it can claim a life. Those of us in the LGBTQIA+ community know that all too well.

But when it's used correctly, a stove can be used to make something extraordinary. It can be used to create a meal for a table, around which people from all walks of life can talk, laugh, and be nourished. It can elicit feelings of welcome and warmth, creating an atmosphere of love and inclusion. When a stove is used properly, it feeds not just the body, but the soul.

You may not be ready to engage this particular stove because of how deeply it has hurt you—and that's okay. As we deal with the damage that these verses have done, we each have our own healing journey to walk. For some of you, the conversation this book provides will be a healing balm; for others, encountering these passages again may be too deep a reminder of the pain they've caused you. Your path to healing may not include revisiting these passages or reading this book, and that's okay. Engage both God and your own inner wisdom before choosing to embark on this journey.

To the straight cisgender folks who may have picked this book up on a whim, you may feel like you're "on the outside looking in" while reading the experiences of the queer folks who contributed to this book. I want to encourage you to read it anyway. Treat this as an opportunity to learn about your siblings in Christ and how you might be a better sibling for them. You might even find some healing for yourself within these pages.

If you—queer folk or cishet ally—choose to take this path, know that we are not starting at ground zero. Thanks to many fantastic theologians and pastors, we know that those verses have been used improperly for far too long, and we can examine them with new eyes. We can see lessons full of love instead of hate. We can see instruction instead of condemnation. Together, we can discover a message around which people from all walks of life can talk, laugh, and be nourished.

Yes, the stove is hot. But we have oven mitts. Let us explore and be nourished.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Redeeming Church has since merged with another like-minded ministry and renamed themselves the Circle of Faith. If you're in the Tampa Bay area and are looking for a fully LGBTQIA+ affirming ministry, I encourage you to check them out (<https://circle.faith/>).