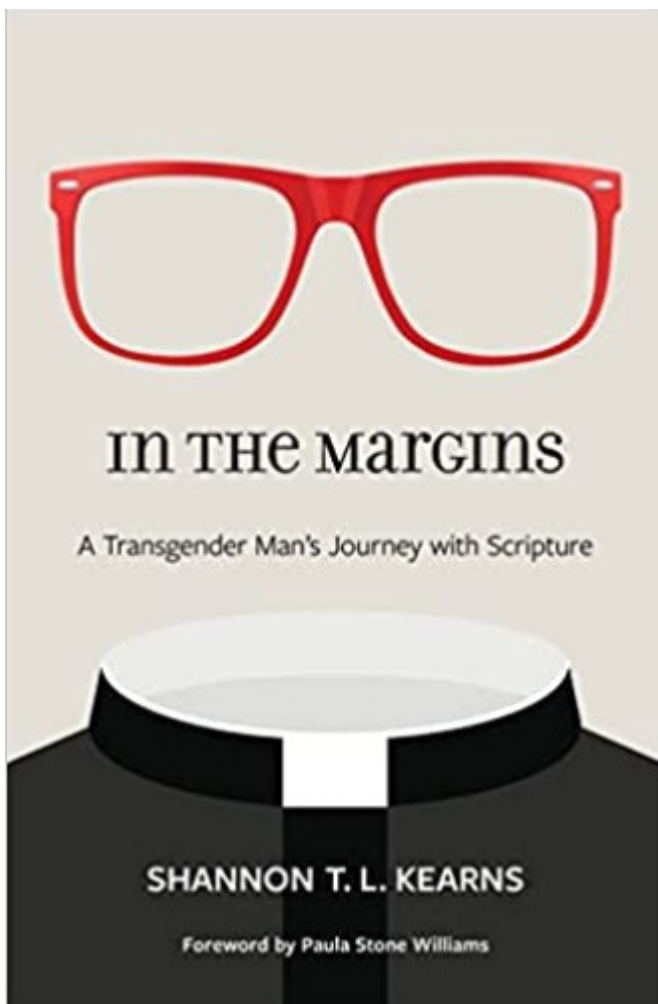


Reading the Bible with a transgender minister

Shannon Kearns knows and is known by scripture deeply; he knows scripture better because he is trans.

by [Benny Vanderburgh](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue

In Review



In the Margins

A Transgender Man's Journey with Scripture

By Shannon T. L. Kearns
Eerdmans

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There are pragmatic reasons that the expanding field of Christian transgender nonfiction overwhelmingly features memoirs. There is so little for trans people in the church, and memoir can be a productive space to play without needing to attach arguments to the scrutiny of more restrictive conversation streams (academic theology, say, or history). Like life, memoir can have its own shape and list of privileged sources to draw from. And from a trans writer's standpoint, memoirs deliver the relational offering that many marginalized people so desperately want to provide: the vital proof for trans readers that someone else like them exists and has figured out how to sustain that existence.

Thus, instead of thinking about whether or not trans Christians can exist, ordained minister Shannon T. L. Kearns asserts that his work begins with an assumed yes. *In the Margins* opens by telling us that trans and other LGBTQ Christians are worthy of love and welcome at God's table as both clergy and laity. Instead of wondering how that can be so, Kearns tells us that his book will offer one way to "do" Christianity while trans.

Kearns's work is so uncomplicatedly compassionate in its narrative voice that reading it at times felt like sitting at coffee hour with a generous and utterly safe church friend. As he tells us, his Christian life began in an evangelical childhood formed by fundamentalist schooling. This felt like important, helpful context for me as I read and made sense of his interpretation of biblical figures and stories across his life so far. By rendering *scripture* with a capital S and by colloquially offering narrative glosses of foundational Bible stories (Joseph, Rahab, Jacob wrestling the angel, the figure of the eunuch), Kearns chooses a very particular—perhaps American, perhaps evangelical—way of zeroing in on a story and then telling us how we should understand it. There are gestures toward the vast and diverse literary and social worlds that have historically interpreted these stories, but Kearns treats them as context that is less important than the greater value of applying scripture to a contemporary or quotidian situation.

Yet the book's subtitle needs to be taken seriously: this is one man's journey through scripture, not an argument about a trans method or a gloss of transgender readings of scripture across time. Kearns deeply knows and is known by scripture; he knows scripture better because he is trans. Because he is a minister, the practical lessons he offers feel pastoral. His care toward the imagined reader made the moments of summarizing Bible figures or stories (such as the eunuch) less challenging for me when I personally disagreed with an interpretation. If he is didactic at times, it makes sense: he is working to overcome a cisgender understanding of gender transition that puts "violation" front and center, and it will take many books and a lot of lessons to accomplish that. Nevertheless, Kearns successfully delivers his message that the Bible is for everyone who seeks it.

His moments of Bible story interpretation always arrive within memoir retelling. For example, as Kearns walks toward and through certain transition milestones, he finds Joseph's gift of sensitivity rising out from the text as a personal message. The strongest moments of this work come through when Kearns simply tells us stories from his life and about his fight to achieve dignified recognition from his loved ones. In that narration, even before scripture is invoked, his deepest theological convictions and faith are there, deepening the skill with which he brings us into his past.

This book is well suited for people who are opening up to the humanity of trans people of faith, as well as for non-Christian trans people. For trans Christians and their treasured loved ones who want to feel connected to and nourished by the life lessons of a gifted pastoral voice, this book is a sweet and protective read. In a world that is so rarely those things to trans Christians, that is cause to celebrate.