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Matthias: Hey friends, this is Matthias Roberts and you're listening to Queerology, a podcast some belief and be. This is Episode 63.

Crystal: One of the things that has upset me the most was walking into like a Barnes and Noble and not being able to find devotionals or story that spoke to my experience.

Matthias: Crystal Cheatham is the founder and creator of Our Bible App. An app for LGBTQ and progressive people of faith who live at the margins. She's an LGBTQ rights activists with a focus on religious liberty. Since 2011, Crystal has worked simultaneously as a ghostwriter and a career rights activist with groups such as Soulforce and The Attic Youth Center.

Matthias: As an entrepreneur, Crystal is the founder of two other projects; Follow The Red Balloon, and the IDentity Kit. Both of which provide resources for marginalized communities of faith. As an outspoken activist, she's written for the Huffington Post, the Philadelphia Gay Newspaper, she sat as a faith and spirituality chair for a steering committee at the HRC, and she's the host of Lord Have Mercy, a podcast about God, sex and the Bible.

Matthias: Crystal's been featured in Teen Vogue, Autostraddle, LGBTQ Nation, among others, and I'm so excited to have her on the podcast today. We're talking about her app, Our Bible App, and the need for inclusive faith communities. Which is what this podcast is all about. But Crystal has created an absolutely incredible one over on her app. She'll tell you more about it in the episode.

Matthias: Before we dive in, a couple of things. Registration has opened for QCF Conference in Chicago. That's happening January 10th through 13th in downtown Chicago, Illinois. We're doing a live episode of Queerology there, that will actually happen this time. And then I'm also leading a workshop/breakout session on developing sustainable resilience practices. That's going to be a ton of fun. Come hang out with us in Chicago, you can find out all the information you want for that at qchristian.org. I think that's everything. So, let's go ahead and dive in.

Matthias: Crystal. Hi, welcome.

Crystal: Hi Matthias.

Matthias: I'm so excited to have you here today. Thank you.

Crystal: Yeah, anytime.

Matthias: The question I ask everyone, how do you identify and then how would you say that your faith has helped form that identity?

Crystal: Well, that's pretty easy, at least the first part. I identify as a straight and narrow lesbian. There's no going back. I think that my faith has enabled me to live out my identity in what feels the most natural. I feel loved by My God, and I feel supported by my holy book. I think those are the two things that have propelled me forward in my orientation.

Matthias: Tell me more about what that relationship has been like? Because you said, propelled you forward.

Crystal: I don't know. I feel at home and embraced by the Bible and the messages that I guess, I theologize for myself. I think that it's a combination of feeling cradled by the hope, my holy book and my relationship with God, but also just feeling so incensed that other people would have any say on what my relationship with God is. So, that's made me dig deeper and continue to move forward.

Matthias: Yeah, you mentioned the Bible and I feel like so much of your work that you're doing in the world centers around this holy texts of making it accessible for people who otherwise or maybe have been told in the past that it's not accessible for queer people.

Crystal: Yeah.

Matthias: Could you tell me a little bit about what brought you to doing that work?

Crystal: Well, I was raised a Seventh Day Adventist. So, I was in a really fundamental space as far as my faith was concerned. I truly believed not only the Bible, but also the Bible rhetoric and the theology and the dogma that my church community put out. So, when I came out, I felt as if I had been tricked or disillusioned to think that people who don't believe Christians are heathens or people who are unbelievers are somehow sinners, or that LGBTQ people have a choice and are living out that choice contrary to what God says.

Crystal: There were a lot of things that were revealed as untrue. And in my search to figure out what was true and what wasn't, and what I believe for myself, I stumbled across activists who also believed the things that, or were searching through the things that I was. I think the real turning point for me was working with Soulforce. Because at the time I had created The Identity Kit Project, which was a way to push out the knowledge that I had discovered into the world. I think the only thing that was really missing from that work was the fight. With Soulforce, I learned how angry I was and how justified my anger was. I think it is definitely and honestly the anger, the sheer white hot anger that has allowed me to continue doing this work and take it up as, I guess, a life mantle.

Matthias: Mm-hmm (affirmative) That anger sounds like an incredibly motivating force.

Crystal: Yeah, I think anger is good mm-hmm (affirmative).

Matthias: Because you say more about that. I feel like so often, especially for those of us who come from more Christian environments, we're taught that anger is a negative emotion and that we should squash it. I believe anger is very good too. I'd love to hear more about that.

Crystal: I guess, I really love that Bible story of Jesus getting furious when He walked into the temple and everybody had set up their wares. What He wanted was for that space to be

Holy, to be apart from the rest of the world. Whoever had decided it was okay to create a market in that space was really wrong. I love that story because it shows that there are really good uses for anger. I loved seeing, the image in my head of Jesus walking into this place and tipping over tables and scaring chickens, and just so disgusted. I think those emotions are really strong and they're very helpful in making the path forward clear.

Crystal: I think the lots of things that happened in our society, I don't know if we would have the precedent that we have of people who are more comfortable with their anger. I'm not talking about violent anger, I'm talking about just getting so emotional and passionate about something that you get up and go outside and do something about it. Whether, it's the protest, whether it is putting your physical body in front of a lawmaker, or writing a letter or starting a group or dismantling a system of oppression that no one is challenging, but everybody knows is there. I think anger is the thing that really allows people to do that.

Matthias: That makes me think of just how anger is such an energetic force, that it requires movement, and that getting out there and doing something seems like such a vital, vital part of it.

Crystal: Yeah. For me, I wanted to do it with my whole life. I can't what I always thought that I would end up here. Before I created the app, I was working as a ghostwriter, and I really enjoyed that work. But I couldn't stop myself is basically what happened.

Matthias: You mentioned the app. Tell me a little bit about it. You started Our Bible App. Its been a journey to get there. But it launched this last year.

Crystal: Yeah, we launched in February. Our Bible app is a progressive Christian media hub. Basically, if you log on and get in there, you'll be able to access free Bibles and paid Bibles. You'll be able to view a small bookstore, hopefully that's growing, and hundreds of daily devotionals that are pro-women and inclusive of interfaith and affirming of LGBTQ people and so social justice minded. Some of them talk about current events and the people who are writing them are all thought leaders of this progressive movement.

Crystal: It's just such a fun space. I'm hoping to continue to make it a community space for those of us who lack community. There's also a chat room and we're trying to find ways to always make it more open and community driven.

Matthias: One thing that was really fascinating to me and that I love about the app are these devotions that you mentioned. That's so interesting because I feel like for me coming from my background, devotions had a very specific thing and there's something that I sensed have shied away from. I don't really want anything to do with them. But in this app, they're so good.

Crystal: They are.

Matthias: Yeah.

Crystal: You would think that there wouldn't be anything out there because we have all of these conservative Christian outlets who are constantly publishing things that are so anti us, anti-progressive everything. But what we have discovered is that the difference is that

people are writing, people are creating, but those who have the power to publish and disseminate that stuff won't because they don't want to.

Crystal: The people that were tapping to write, they've been doing this for a long time. They have blogs, they have books that they have self-published or they have released via presses, and they understand the world through this very progressive, very inclusive lens. I want to give them a platform. I want to give these people a place to tell their stories, and to show the world what their theology is like, because somewhere along the way, Christianity got really dirty and really gross and really ugly. So, we really want to take that name back and dust it off so that it's not just a tradition of exclusion, but a tradition that is actually what I think Jesus wanted. I know it sounds so Christian to say that. What does Jesus want? But really, I don't think that the Jesus of the Bible would look at what Christianity is today especially with what's going on in evangelicalism and say that's what I started.

Matthias: You mentioned this trying to bring in a community element to the app as well. I feel like there's something like for me, especially doing this podcast, I've realized there are a few communities out there for queer people of faith, for people who are sitting in more progressive spaces, but there aren't that many. I think that that's such a vital and needed space for people to be able to come whenever they want and have that built in community. What does community mean for you? Why is that such an important piece of this app?

Crystal: I think community is really important to me. Having people who speak from the same place that I do, who have a vision of the world that is like mine, and who care about other people the way that I care about people. That's really important. I used to be able to find that at church. I used to be able to show up and sing and commune and eat with these people, and worship and pray. And then also be able to study and work together. It was like, we helped each other. We were there for each other, we bounced ideas off of each other, and we prayed together.

Crystal: Since I came out, I have been hard pressed to find a church that allows me to do all those things with people. People will listen to this and say, please come to our church, but I'm in Philadelphia and all of the churches that I have visited in Philly are shy of something in some way. So, what I want to do is create a network of people who I know are out there, and a place, and right now it is virtual, where we can share in some of that that good stuff that comes with being able to share ideas and thoughts and prayers and all those things together.

Matthias: Yeah, there's something so beautiful in having that function ... What I'm thinking about is, like you mentioned, having all of that met in a church before you came out. I feel like there's so many people, myself included, who yearn to have that space again, but can't for one reason or another.

Crystal: Yeah, I guess community for me is where the spirit is. You can end up having church anywhere with anybody. They don't have to be a believer, but we are each spiritual beings. Whether you honor it and practice a religion or a faith, it doesn't matter. We are all so spiritual. When we come together, and we share in laughter, and we share in ideas, we are having a church. So, that's what I hope to create and recreate as we invite people to use the app, and to use the chat and to join us online and interact. Because without

it, we suffocate. Without it, we die. Without it, we think that we are not important. That is one of the biggest tools that conservatism has used, is isolation.

Crystal: Isolation of the queer person, isolation of the trans person in the church, isolation of the person who doesn't dress in heels or whatever. So many of us have decided to leave that space, but we still have that spiritual desire, that spiritual thing that makes us human. What I've discovered is that there are pockets of progressive Christian communities, but we don't have a central nervous system. Say, like the National Religious Broadcasters, which is conservative and they have members and syndicated publishers and radio outlets around the world. We don't have that one thing that pulls us all together and feeds us.

Crystal: What I have started to do is to build that nervous system, build those connections as a central hub for progressive content. We have churches that are starting to create partnerships with us. I stumbled across Altar Guild, which is a podcast and book collective created by some pastors in the Midwest. Their stuff is so good. But I never would have known unless I was at their church or in their immediate community.

Crystal: So, what I want is for you and I to be able to access that really good content, that stuff that really speaks to our heart, and those people who share same values of openness and affirmation and inclusivity. And be able to share community with them.

Matthias: Yeah, because you're right. It seems like there's so many people out there in the world who are doing this kind of work. But finding them is so hard. It takes so much work to even if they're putting it out there, like you said, there is no central nervous system.

Crystal: No, it's a needle in a haystack life, man. That is my job. I spend hours a week just scrolling through Twitter and Facebook and Instagram and trying to find those people who are doing that good work. It's hard. It's really easy to stumble across bad theology. Churches that seem affirming, and then once you poke a little bit, you break down the wall, and you realize that they are just as trash as the next one.

Crystal: People trust me, yeah, I'm trying to do that work. I'm trying to make sure that the content that gets onto the app is not going to trigger you or offend you, or anything like that, but will lift you up and give you hope. Maybe not so much in religion or Christianity, but hopefully in the person that has written it, and their journey and what it was.

Matthias: I'm curious, because you're talking about this very inclusive and open community and interfaith work. Why a Bible app? Because in conservative years, those things seem mutually exclusive. What I'm hearing you say is they don't have to be.

Crystal: Oh, no. I don't. I think in making the app, I had to be true to myself and my experience as a Crystal eccentric one. Far be it for me to create something about spirit work that doesn't include my experience. But I didn't want it to be just for Christians. Because so many of us identify as spiritual but not religious. So, giving access to the Bible, because I think that the Bible is so important. As Chris Stroop has said, you can read it in whatever voice you really want to. You can take it literally or you can just understand the stories as guides for your life.

Crystal: But I just think the Bible is so rich of knowledge, the kind of timeless knowledge that doesn't pass away. People can say that Shakespeare's timeless, and people can say that the Bible is timeless. I don't know how to create a spirit centered application, an app or a community without some kind of holy book as a pillar, or as a guide. Eventually, I think it would be really cool to create something for the progressive Muslim community. But that would have to be a partnership, because that's not my faith background. Or the reclamative or is it deconstruction or reclamation of the Jewish faith? I don't know.

Matthias: I don't know either.

Crystal: See, I speak to it. But I think that America is predominantly Christian, and many of us come in and out of faith through this space, this Christian space. My idea was, I can't catch everybody, but I can catch those who understand it from a Crystal eccentric space. We can offer people things along the spectrum. If you are at the shallow end, and you identify as agnostic, you believe that there is a God but you don't believe in the narrative put forth by the Bible, you will find stuff in the app that speaks to your heart and gives you a way to meditate and to reflect on the world and your emotions.

Crystal: If you are in the middle like me, there's lots of stuff for you. If you really do believe in the Bible canon and it helps to guide your thoughts and your actions in life, then you will find things that are very biblical, that are even hermeneutical in their exegesis of the text.

Crystal: Yeah, I say interfaith and I'm trying to make it as interfaith as I can. Then, I don't know, I think the one thing that besides traditional culture that really keeps religions apart is to be exclusionary to other people. To say you are other, you're an outsider, therefore, you are not one of us and also we are better than you. I just don't want the app that I have created to ever say that my religion because I'm Christian is better than your religion because you're Muslim. That makes no sense to me because so much of religion is wrapped in culture, is wrapped in tradition and ritual. Those things that make you close to your community.

Crystal: Once you rip that off, once you take that skin off the underneath, it's pretty much all the same. We believe in a God and we believe that we honor ourselves and that God by using how we live our life.

Matthias: You all just announced on Twitter not too long ago that you're doing some stuff for the holidays. I'd love to hear about that because you highlight the fact that holidays can be really really hard for queer people of faith, which is so true.

Crystal: Yes. We have some really cool things coming up. I think the funnest part is just going to be our chat areas. Today, we recorded a video. It's so cute, it's framed in the fashion of the office, and we're just trying to get people to visit our chat rooms because they're so fun when you do get to chat with people that you've never met before. I grew up in the '90s, and so that was a huge part of my after school thing. With coming home and seeing Yahoo Messenger, or MSN Messenger, and just chatting with people. I see that as a very real space for us to find each other. We're going to open up and maintain an OBA holiday chat for the entire week this week, leading up to Thanksgiving and after. Hopefully we'll make some new friends in there. We also have some amazing authors who have written for us, and we'll be rolling out their devotionals over the next couple of weeks.

Matthias: It's so needed, to have that space. Especially for people who are going back to family or hometown, or whatever situations that are potentially unsafe, or at least non supportive.

Crystal: Non supportive, unsafe. Even if you do have a very lovely and open family, but you just don't have any But your views on Trump are different. Your views on whether you should go to church are different, or your views on gay people are different. You can't take that for an entire week at a time, and so we wanna be able to share our stories together. We wanna be able to lift each other up and just be in community, and find spirit in these chat rooms. We had such a good chat with AnaYelsi. AnaYelsi did a 10 day devotional for us during the beginning of the fall, and there were seven of us in the chat room, and I think about three of us were actually talking. But I ended up laughing so hard, and realizing that we had a lot more in common than just using the App. I want people to have access to that. It's so fun. Believe me.

Matthias: Yeah. I'm sitting here like, "I need to jump into that."

Crystal: [crosstalk 00:28:05] chat room. Please. I will add you.

Matthias: So fun. Yeah. It'd be so fun. We're talking about community and the holidays. I'd be curious maybe to shift into something maybe a little bit more theological, without having to be theological. I feel like your App is all around, is all about the particular experience of people who are on the margins. Whether that's queer, whatever, any number of things. I'd be curious like, as we jump back in and engage the texts that have been given to us in certain ways, and then engage them in new ways. What do you think the power is in that around Advent? Like a queer Advent, or any number of things. I don't know if that even make sense.

Crystal: I guess I'm picking up what you're putting down. I think that there has always been power in story. Before we had the Bible canon. People passed along the stories of Moses, and Abraham, and Noah through an oral tradition. Story ignites our imaginations, and helps us to formulate ideas of who we are and who we can be. It's so exciting. So many of the writings that come out during Christmas are, they're just full of imagination. They're so story full. One of the things that has upset me the most, the thing that made me, that put fire in my belly, and was like, "I need to do something about this," was, walking into a Barnes and Noble and not being able to find devotionals or story that spoke to my experience, that validated me, that said that, "You do exist too, and look how quirky and fun you are," or, "Look at this problem that we're dealing with. This is how you can do it. Here's a tool." I didn't get that. I thought, "There are so many people who do write this stuff, so why isn't it here?"

Crystal: And so that's what I think is really powerful about this Advent season, and these devotionals. It's that these marginalized people are writing it, theologizing their experiences, their queer experiences, their person of color experiences, their immigrant experiences, their native American or first nation experiences. A story is something that knits us together, I wanna say as Americans, because even after all of this I'm still a very patriotic person. Story is something that reminds us that we're not alone. You know, having people write this stuff right now, I think it's gonna be so fun, and so amazing, and help me, if I'm just being selfish, helping me feel a little less alone in my little town in Pennsylvania.

Matthias: Right. Because there's something to be said for that experience of walking into almost any store, and looking for holiday stuff that is even somewhat queer.

Crystal: Yeah. Yeah, no, forget about it.

Matthias: It doesn't exist. Yeah.

Crystal: No. Yeah, we don't get that stuff. That's a side that's suppose to me excluded from Christmas, from Advent, from that. I'm excited to see what people create, and I'm excited to show everyone that it can be done.

Matthias: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. Right. To even bring a little bit of imagination to the stories, and to play, and to have that space to bring a queer experience into some of our most sacred, or one of our most sacred seasons, within the Christian church. We're there too.

Crystal: Right. There's two really awesome devotionals that I'm sitting on that I haven't released yet. I guess they'll be released this week. One is by Kaitlin Curtice. She writes about her experience as a native woman in this time of Thanksgiving, and this big feast. She takes it in such a wonderful direction, while also reminding us that this land was not the white man's land. There were so many other people here first. But also in such a reparative and essential way. I love what she's done. But then we also have this one, About Imagination by Laura Jane Truman. Laura Jane Truman's writing is just so textured. I just hired a new editor, Theresa, and one of the things that constantly our writers get tripped up on is just the commas and the punctuation and whatever, and when to put in parenthesis or quotes or whatever.

Matthias: It's real.

Crystal: I know right? Laura Jane Truman is just, she is using it and you are actually able to hear her saying it in your head when she writes this stuff, because she's just so on top of it. I can't wait. I can't wait.

Matthias: Oh my gosh. I can't either. Those are both people that I just adore.

Crystal: Right?

Matthias: Both of them.

Crystal: Yeah. We're in a celebrity high when we get to talk with them and engage with them. Yeah, so Laura Jane Truman is also doing a fireside chat in 10 days, on November 29th. Yeah, it's gonna be so lovely, actually, just to sit in the chat room and talk to her about why she wrote what she wrote, and what she meant by it, and listen or read some of the side stories from those who participated in the devotional.

Matthias: You just said fireside chat.

Crystal: Yeah.

Matthias: I feel like I have an idea of what that is, but tell us more. What is a fireside chat?

Crystal: The fireside chat is a space where we have invited authors to commune with us. We open up the chat space and we ask people to sign up for specific author. We have a time, and you show up, basically, in the App. You're staring at your phone, and those of us at the OBA office will put together a list of questions for the author, but also for the users or the readers of the App. We'll just get to hang out together in there, via text. It's a private space, so it's not Twitter, it's not Facebook. Only those who wanna be there are there. We really get into some really fun and cool conversation. The way to sign up is just to go to ourbibleapp.com/ ... God, what is it? It's lets-chat. /lets-chat. And you'll be able to join a chat room or a fireside chat.

Matthias: So cool. You just kind of answered this question, but to maybe start wrapping up. How can people get the App?

Crystal: Yeah.

Matthias: Is it available everywhere?

Crystal: It is available on Android phones, and Apple phones. You can also get it on an iPad, or a ... There's another kind of tablet where you can access it on. Yeah, just go into the App store, or the Google Play store, and download it, and there it's yours. For the most part you're able to access the Bibles and devotionals, but if you wanna actually use some of the cooler features you have to create a password and sign in, and yeah. You don't have to, but if you subscribe for the \$10 a year, you really help us continue to do the work that we're doing. We hope that people would take the time to subscribe. It's only \$10 for an entire year. That's insane.

Matthias: For a whole year. That's less than a dollar a month. Yeah.

Crystal: Yeah. I'm really ripping myself off.

Matthias: How can people find you? How can they find your work?

Crystal: Yeah. I have a website, crystalcheatham.com. The thing that I update the most on there is the podcast. Lord have mercy, but if you wanna chat with me, you can find me on Twitter @crystalcheatham, on Facebook Crystal Cheatham. Everything's basically Crystal Cheatham.

Matthias: Well, thank you so much Crystal. It is so cool.

Crystal: Thank you so much for having me. This was actually really nice. Yeah, you got me into a good head space. I'm excited about the rest of my day now.

Matthias: Oh great. [inaudible 00:37:37].

Crystal: Yeah.

Matthias: Cool. Be sure to grab a copy of Our Bible App wherever you get your Apps, and follow Crystal across the internet @crystalcheatham. Queerology is on Twitter and Instagram @queerologypod, or you can Tweet me directly, @matthiasroberts. Queerology is supported by its listeners. To help keep spreading a message of love and belonging,

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