## Issues, Etc.

## JOURNAL

Did God Really Say?

A Review of Nadia Bolz-Weber's

Shameless: A Sexual Reformation

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail:
Treasure Hidden in a Field

by Andrew Abraham

In this issue, I offer a review of Nadia Bolz-Weber's latest book, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation*. Martin Luther's Reformation began with Scripture and asked, "What does the Bible say?" Where does Bolz-Weber's reformation begin, and where does it lead? Read on and see.

In our Wittenberg Trail feature, *Treasure Hidden in a Field*, Andrew Abraham tells us his story of growing up a devout Roman Catholic, his path into and out of the priesthood and his discovery of the hidden treasure of the Lutheran Confession.

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Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host **Issues, Etc.** 

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## Did God Really Say?

## A Review of Nadia Bolz-Weber's "Shameless: A Sexual Reformation"

by Todd Wilken

At first glance, there could not be two more different personalities in Christian media and publishing than Joel Osteen and Nadia Bolz-Weber. Osteen is smooth and saccharine, Bolz-Weber sharp and acerbic. Osteen is the unassuming nice guy, Bolz-Weber is the in-your-face bad girl.

Joel Osteen has written over a dozen best selling books. They all have the same message: People may think there's something wrong with you, but God says different:

People may tell you, "You're just too small." But God says, "You're just the right size for Me." People may say, "You're not talented. We don't need you. You don't have anything to offer." But God says, "You are fearfully and wonderfully made. You are talented. You are creative. You are anointed. You are smart. You are intelligent. You are amazing." 1

Ironically, this is almost exactly the message of Nadia Bolz-Weber's latest best seller, *Shameless, A Sexual Reformation:* People, Christian people, may think there's something wrong with you, but God says different.

Nadia Bolz-Weber has carefully curated her public image and brand. She is "the tattooed, no-nonsense Evangelical Lutheran pastor who will blow you away with her honesty, hilarity, and plenty of 'holy sh\*t' enlightenment." <sup>2</sup> In *Shameless*, she presents herself as a 21st century Martin Luther. Predictably then, in *Shameless* she calls for nothing less than a "Sexual Reformation." But Bolz-Weber fails to understand both Luther and the Reformation.

Part memoir, part manifesto, *Shameless* is addressed to readers who live and love on the sexual periphery of what Bolz-Weber mockingly calls "God's plan." "God's plan is for everyone to be a heterosexual, cis-gender Christian who never has sex with anyone until they marry their one true lover and make babies." She continues:

If you were to draw a circle that represents all the people on the planet, and then inside it draw another small circle to represent the people who live according to "God's plan," then, well, very few people on the planet fit into that circle... Also not included in that circle are divorced people, people in unhappy marriages, people who have sex before marriage, people who masturbate, asexuals, gay people, bisexuals, people who are not Christians, people who are gender non-binary... If that's "God's plan," then God planned poorly.<sup>3</sup>

You have been lied to. "God's plan" for you sexually isn't what you've been told it is. It isn't what the Bible says it is. It isn't what the Church has taught. People may think there's something wrong with you, but God says different.

As a memoir, *Shameless* presents Bolz-Weber's coming-of-age story — from her first sexual partner to her post-divorce rediscovery of sex as a religious experience— in an honest, self deprecating way. As a manifesto, *Shameless* is a montage of boilerplate feminist assumptions, LGBTQ slogans, identity politics, and intersectionality, presented before a blurry backdrop of distorted Bible references and revisionist history.

The book's stated target is Christian Purity Culture, a largely discredited abstinence movement in American Evangelicalism from the 1990s. However, *Shameless* spends very little time engaging or responding to the specific problems of Christian Purity Culture. Instead, Bolz-Weber assumes that this short lived movement is more or less a summary of the Church's historic teaching on sexuality. She constantly confuses its shame-based social and sexual stereotypes with "the church's beliefs about sex and bodies and gender."<sup>4</sup>

Bolz-Weber cleverly conflates the Church's real teaching on sexual morality, the errors of Purity Culture, and lazy stereotypes of uptight, sexually repressed Christianity. *Shameless* then casually dismisses millennia of Christian sexual ethics as ignorant and phobic:

I would argue that any theology that assumes God has placed humans like rats into a big lab experiment, giving us shocks for bad behavior and reward pellets for good behavior, is bad theology. So is any theology that assumes, even though God created humanity in mind-blowing diversity, that God is pleased only with a certain type of human. This view of God has led so many of us to bury our sexual treasure out of fear.<sup>5</sup>

Shameless is a 200 page strawman, but the baby of historic Christian sexual ethics goes out with the bathwater of Purity Culture. Bolz-Weber has no use for either.

Of course, setting aside the Bible and the collected wisdom of one's Christian forebears leaves a void. But Bolz-Weber is happy to fill it. Here's how:

If religion has been the venue in which the power of sex is taken most seriously, could it also be the place in which a new conversation about it arises? ... Can we who have been raised within a broadly Christian culture, if not squarely within the church, be a people who strive for the sexual flourishing of all people? And if so, where can we look for guidance? <sup>6</sup>

Bolz-Weber answers her own question: "As counterintuitive as it might seem, the place I'm suggesting we look to for help is the Bible." Does she intend to actually read the Bible and tell her readers what it says about sex? Not on your life. Rather, she immediately focuses on what she calls "Jesus' own ethic: love God and love our neighbors as ourselves." She concludes:

It's time for us to grab some matches and haul our antiquated and harmful ideas about sex and bodies and gender into the yard... I'm not suggesting we make a few simple amendments; new wine in old

wineskins ain't gonna cut it. I'm saying let's burn it the f\*ck down and start over.7

Thus rejecting 99.999% of Scripture as irrelevant, and in the name of "Jesus' own ethic," *Shameless* dives deep into progressive Christianity's only real source of truth: personal experience.

Whatever sexual flourishing looks like for you, that's what I would love to see happen in your life. Let us seek to be stewards of our bodies, to live in joy of our createdness, honest about our shortcomings, soaking up the grace of God's rain. Let us find beauty and pleasure in our individual human bodies, trusting each other to use our gifts of sexuality according to our dynamis, our strength and capacity. Let us treat ourselves and others, no matter what our talents, as if we are all holy. Because we are.8

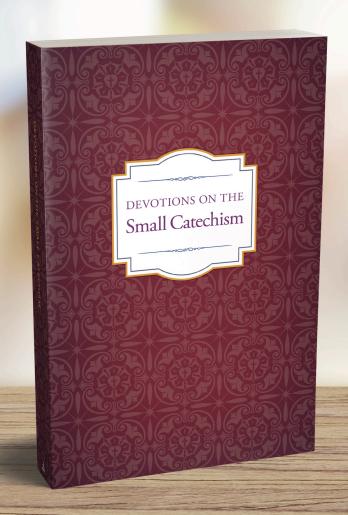
The climax of the book's anecdotes-as-authority is the story of a lesbian woman, Cindy, burning the pages of her Bible in the fire of a Wyoming Lakota sweat lodge (I'm not making this up). Cindy stands before the fire. Cindy tears out and burns the pages containing Scripture's prohibitions of homosexuality. Then, moments later Cindy tears the four Gospels out of her Bible, and "with her right hand she clutched the pages of the Gospels over her heart, and with her left she tossed the rest in to burn." Bolz-Weber explains:

There are those who will say that it is 'dangerous' to think we can decide for ourselves what is sacred in the Bible and what is not. I reject this idea, and here's why. The Gospels are the canon within the canon. The Bible, as Martin Luther said, is the cradle that holds Christ. The point of gravity is the story of Jesus, the Gospel. The closer a text of the Bible is to that story or to the heart of that story's message, the more authority it has. The farther away it is, the less its authority.

Bolz-Weber's reductionist hermeneutic allows her considerable latitude to reinterpret the precious little Scripture she does actually engage in *Shameless*. Here is her reimagining of Genesis 3:8-11. Surprise, it's all about sex:

Rather than just be with God as we were created, the humans chose to try to be like God, and that sh\*t has not stopped to this day. We love taking our so-called knowledge of what is good and what is evil, of who is good and who is evil, and applying that to ourselves and to others like we

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were God. The very first expression of shame was over our naked, sexual bodies. And since then, we earthlings have tried to define and control and condemn human sexuality. Shame has an origin, and it is not in God. When Adam and Eve tried to avoid God, God said, "Where are you?" and they said, "We were naked and tried to hide from you because we were afraid." Then God said to them, "Wait. Who told you you were naked?" ... Maybe you, too, are hiding, having listened to a voice other than God's. But can you hear God saying, "Wait. Who told you you were naked? Who told you that you have to lie to be accepted? Who told you your body is not beautiful and worthy to be loved? Who told you that your sexual expression is something to be ashamed of? Who told you that?" My money is on the snake. And he's a damned liar.<sup>10</sup>

For Bolz-Weber, Adam and Even didn't fall into sin, they fell into shame. The lie of the devil wasn't "You will not surely die," but rather, "You should be ashamed of sex." For Bolz-Weber, God doesn't ask "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" Rather, God asks, "Who told you that your sexual expression is something to be ashamed of?" It's an entirely different version of the fall than the one found in the Bible. And it leads to an entirely different version of the Gospel.

Bolz-Weber has been described as non-conformist and cutting-edge. I couldn't disagree more. The author of *Shameless* is the very picture of conformist, safe, and mainstream thinking on sex today. Her ideas are the very same ideas promoted in academia, the media, pop culture, and mainline Protestant churches. I assert that if the author didn't wear a clerical collar and call herself a pastor, *Shameless* would be seen for what it is: a progressive cliché; a thoroughly unremarkable book exposing the alleged evils of Christian teaching on sex, and calling for an all-affirming approach to sexual flourishing. Like Bolz-Weber herself, *Shameless* adheres to all the house rules of what Ryan Anderson and Sherif Girgis have called "progressive puritanism."

In the end, it almost could have been written by Joel Osteen —perhaps Joel after a few beers. The bottom line, revealed through one anecdote after another: God is there to offer unconditional affirmation:

The self God loves, the self God is in relationship with, is your actual self. God isn't waiting for you to become thinner or heterosexual or married or celibate or more ladylike or less crazy or more spiritual or less of an alcoholic in order to love you... When that accusing voice is on repeat in your head, know that it is not the voice of God. God's voice is found in the warm singsong of a mother to her newborn, the

one who says, 'You are beloved.' God's voice declares us clean, justified, forgiven and new. It imparts to us a worthiness that has nothing to do with our efforts or our accomplishments or our

becoming some imagined ideal.11

This is the problem with Bolz-Weber's entire theology, not just her approach to sexual ethics. In Shameless, she speaks freely of forgiveness, but when it comes to sex, there's really nothing to forgive. She doesn't deny that Jesus died on the Cross so that you could be forgiven all

your sins. But she insists that you get to define what those sins are.

This is why so many otherwise orthodox Christians have mistakenly concluded that Bolz-Weber "gets" the Gospel. She doesn't. What she gets and gives is the Zeitgeist, wrapped in moralistic, therapeutic Deism, served with a few Lutheran buzzwords repurposed to serve the cause of the sexual revolution.

Is the cause of Shameless real reformation? From the first pages, it is clear that Bolz-Weber has a problem with the Sixth Commandment: "You shall not commit adultery." She claims the mantle of Martin Luther, but has no use for his explanation of this commandment: "We should fear and love God that we may lead a chaste and decent life in words and deeds, and each love and honor his spouse." This is precisely the version of "God's plan" she rejects.

Martin Luther's Reformation went back to Scripture. Bolz-Weber's dismisses Scripture. Luther asked, "What does the Bible say?" Bolz-Weber asks, "What does your heart tell you?" In *Shameless*, Bolz-Weber confuses reformation with plain old rebellion.



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Joel Osteen, *Understanding Your Value*, <a href="https://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/Article.aspx?articleid=6465">https://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/Article.aspx?articleid=6465</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> https://www.makers.com/faith

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, Shameless: A Sexual Reformation, New York: Convergent Books, 2019, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

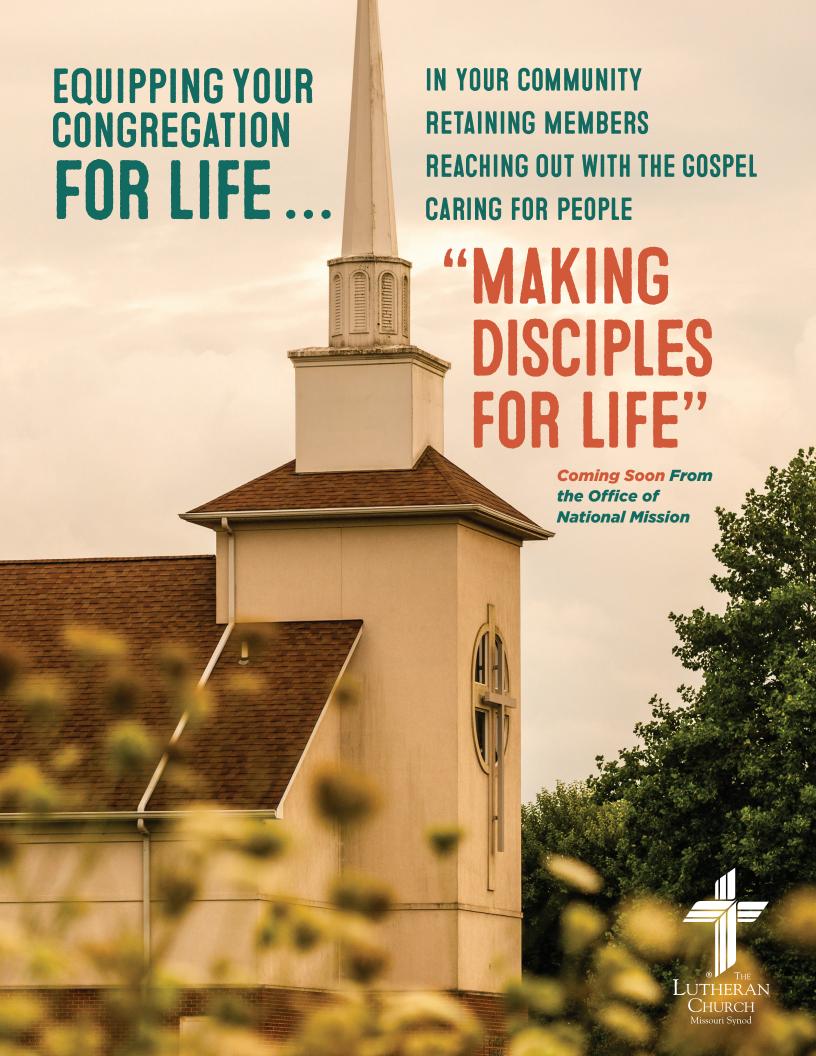
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 60

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-72.

<sup>10</sup> lbid., pp. 132-33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp.180-81.







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### Wittenberg Trail: Treasure Hidden in a Field

by Rev. Andrew J. Abraham

It is very difficult for me to imagine anyone being more deeply in love with the Catholic Church than I have been most of my life. Growing up in the Catholic school system had a profound and abiding impact on me. Being educated by dedicated, loving, hard-working nuns, and serving as an altar boy under committed and highly motivated priests, left an indelible impression on me. These experiences instilled in me a love for the traditions and common beliefs associated with classic Catholicism.

Sadly, I was a very poor student, always the worst in my class. My failures in an academic setting wounded me terribly. But when I donned my beloved altar boy cassock, and went to work lighting the altar candles and preparing the altar for mass, my confidence would return to me. Consequently, I knew at a very early age that I was being called by God to serve Him in the holy ministry. I told anyone and everyone that I was going to be a priest when I grew up. The strength of that resolve characterized my adolescent years and dominated the greater part of all my thoughts. While I continued to struggle academically through high school, I tried to make up for it by devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary, study of the *Lives of the Saints*, and an adamant refusal to leave the house apart from the Brown Scapular worn about my shoulders. The scapular promised me reduced time in Purgatory so long as I was wearing it at the moment of my death.

I joined the Army Reserves while finishing up high school, so I was immediately drawn into our nation's first war with Iraq. We won that war handily, and soldiers came home from the Persian Gulf to a hero's welcome. The local

diocese felt inclined to give me a chance by sending me to the seminary, though my academic records were far less than desirable.

For the next several years, I studied and prepared for the priesthood. There were certainly times when I took note of pretty girls and felt sadness because dating or pursuing romantic relationships was off limits. There were times when I considered leaving the seminary because I felt discouraged by loneliness, and pined for the comforts of married life. Nevertheless, I soldiered on, having been told emphatically that the devil did not want me to be a priest. Therefore, it was Satan tempting me as I sometimes dreamed longingly of falling in love and sharing my life with a soulmate. Serving Christ's Church was a strong desire for me. But the Catholic leadership declared with emphasis that if you are not called by God to be celibate, then you are not called by God to be a part of the clergy.

Eventually, I was ordained to the priesthood. Preaching was fun. Offering mass to multitudes was quite rewarding. Hearing thousands of confessions was meaningful, though very tiring when the lines were long. Sharing my excitement about Jesus was enjoyable and fulfilling. But at the end of every day, I was well aware that a lifestyle of contented celibacy was not within my grasp. I would spend my years always wishing it was somehow possible to meet my fundamental human need for intimacy. Putting it plainly, it hurt to be so lonely. On Sundays, the congregation would all go home to afternoons spent with others, while I moped around a rectory that suffocated my soul and diminished my appetite for life. It didn't help that I was living in the rectory with my supervisor, a severely alcoholic senior priest who was even more depressed than I was. He truly believed that when he died, he would go to hell, and that nothing could change this grim fate.

After a couple of years of trying my best, I finally broke down. I confessed to the bishop that I was not meant for a life of celibacy. My heart wasn't in it, and

living it would be impossible for me. Several months later, I packed my things and drove away from it all. I never assumed for a moment that I would ever abandon the Catholic Church. Since I could no longer serve God as his ordained minister, I thought that I would make a profession of sharing my passion for literature and poetry with others. God had much different plans for me.

After relocating to St. Louis, Missouri, I studied poetry and Shakespeare at a local university. The classes were thoroughly enjoyable. Also welcome was the long-desired opportunity to meet and date girls. While adjusting to this new chapter in my life, I continued to attend Catholic mass on Sundays. But this always soured my mood, and put me into devastating blue funks that were tremendously hard to shake off. No matter how much was said about Jesus at those masses, the message I received was the old message I had been confronted with as a child in school: *Thou art a failure; thou must do better, or saved thou shalt not be*.

Spiritually speaking, I was like a man, listless and glum, aimlessly walking across an unspectacular field. I was not in any way expecting to find something new, much less a treasure. Having been a Catholic priest, I could not have assumed there were any new aspects of the Christian faith waiting to be discovered. So, when I made a new friend who invited me to attend a church of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, I was mildly agreeable to it, but expected exactly nothing.

The Lutheran church I attended was wonderful. The pastor gave an extraordinary sermon forcing me to take a hard look at myself and reconsider what it means to have a Savior. It impressed me more than I can say. After meeting him a few times on Sundays, I mustered the courage to visit him in his office on a weekday. There he spoke very directly to me about God's holy Law. Then he covered me in the love and consolation of the Gospel apart from the Law. He was speaking to me of the Gospel in its purity, which I had never heard



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before. My breath was taken from me; my heart pounded. In the pastor's presence, I began to sob. When he was pressed for time and had to be somewhere else, he compassionately allowed me to linger in his office alone so I could regain my composure before exiting the facility.

Interestingly, it was around this time that a new film about Martin Luther was in theaters. I wanted to see it, not because I was interested in Luther yet, but because the actor playing Luther was a favorite of mine. When I saw the movie, I immediately knew that my understanding of Luther's significance was severely deficient. Suddenly, I wanted to learn more about him and what he was all about.

Over the next couple of years, I lived in various places but eventually returned to my hometown of Nashville, Tennessee. I secured a job at a downtown homeless shelter, did lots of dating, lots of fly-fishing, and lots of reading. On Sundays, I rotated between Catholic masses and Lutheran Divine Services, and prayed for guidance. In 2004, a new biography of Martin Luther by Martin Marty came out, and I devoured it. There was one section in particular which I reread almost daily. It was becoming clear to me that the guidance I had prayed for was starting to make itself known.

During this same year, I met the woman who would become my wife. She was a Methodist. On Christmas Eve, we got engaged and decided to become Lutherans together. We would have a Lutheran pastor officiate our Lutheran wedding in a Lutheran church. Pastor Mark Koch, an excellent and patient man, oversaw the whole process for us. Using *Luther's Small* and *Large Catechisms* as our guide, Pastor Koch brought me to the next level of understanding the Lutheran tradition.

The power of the pure Gospel was beginning to slake the thirst of my parched soul. There is no doubt that the doctrine of Alien Righteousness was the most important aspect of the treasure hidden in the field. Abandoning the Roman Catholic view of synergistic "cooperation," I finally understood why I could be

certain of my salvation, although I am an undeserving sinner. A new shaft of light had broken through the clouds.

Looking back on this period in my history, I consider the first time I received Holy Communion at a Lutheran Divine Service one of the most pivotal experiences of my life. Though I was full of trembling, ever since that moment in particular, the die has been cast. I have been a zealous and joyful Lutheran, unwilling to ever go back to my previous church.



Rev. Andrew J. Abraham was born in Michigan but moved with his family to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1981, when he was ten years old. He grew up in the Roman Catholic Church. In 1991, he served in the Persian Gulf War as an Army reservist. After the war, he received his degree from Loyola University in New Orleans and his Master of Divinity from Notre Dame Seminary also in New Orleans. He was ordained to the priesthood in 2000, but left the priesthood in 2003. He was married in 2005, and in the same year he and his wife became Lutherans. After going through the colloquy process, Abraham became a called pastor of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in July of 2008. He currently serves as pastor of Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church in Crossville, Tennessee. He and his wife, Monique, have three beautiful boys.

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