

Authority,  
Freedom and  
the Dreams  
that We Are  
Made of

By  
Dale Rosenberger

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*Renewing Radical Discipleship* pamphlet 6,  
edited by Dan Bell and Brent Laythem

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## **Introduction**

America is a dream factory like no other place on earth. When we dream, it is in the Technicolor of personal choice and individual fulfillment, with a dash of triumphalism. (Witness the people who make the “Most Admired List.”) Over time these colors can run and fade as we discover that our allegiances have been misplaced. We are surprised when we learn that God’s blessing does not rest here. It is reserved for yet another story. In relationship with Christ and his people, we are able to sort out these allegiances and loyalties, and get them right. And that is what this booklet explores.

## **One Story: A World without Bearings**

A pastor tells of her halting attempts to navigate the rocky shoals of marital discord with a couple (a true story with fictitious names). Nick approached his pastor with a disturbing scenario. Not only was his wife, Melinda, withdrawing from their marriage, she was also growing inappropriately close to a co-worker. Nick confessed his part in these troubles. Wrestling with demons of substance abuse, alcohol had led to his insensitivity and neglect toward Melinda. He feared that he had squelched a fragile flame of marital trust and tenderness. And so Nick approached his pastor prepared to do his part, motivated to reclaim his marriage, and eager to make amends.

Both Nick and Melinda held responsible positions outside the home. They had two grade school children, Lana and Jeremy. They were both active and concerned parents. There were fairly recent new members at Central Community Church. The couple had many church friends, and Melinda’s sister, Denise, was a church leader.

Melinda was adrift. She, like many working women of recent times, was showing signs of a sad rite of passage that had been devouring working men since the 1950s and ’60s: the mid-life crisis. After so much sacrifice, what did it all mean? After focusing on the needs of others, what about her own needs? After all the unavoidable hurt that accumulates in a marriage, why remain? Melinda agreed to meet with the pastor and Nick for only one session. Remote and evasive, it was clear she was merely going through the motions.

Not long after, Nick learned that his wife and her ‘friend’ had moved beyond kindred spirits to soul mates; a level of physical intimacy was coming into play. Melinda saw no reason why she should pull back and put distance between them. The “forsaking all others” part of her marriage vows was lost upon her. Nick tried to be calm and patient, but the panic of losing her did not bring out the best in him.

Melinda stopped meeting with the pastor. The pastor hoped that significant others might help her see what she was doing, before it was too late. If she couldn’t hear the truth from her husband or pastor, then perhaps she would from her sister Denise or from other church leaders. Instead of the truth, Melinda heard “only you can know what is right and best for you.” “Whatever you want most, that is what you deserve.” The stalemate continued.

Months later, Nick glumly sat in the pastor’s study. Melinda had asked for a divorce. The marriage was ending. Nick asked for prayer. The pastor asked if she might pray publicly for them now that it was decided. It was that church’s custom to mention personal struggles and joys in the Sunday pastoral prayer. Nick said yes, and thanked her.

That Sunday, along with other concerns, the pastor prayed for “Nick and Melinda in a time of change.” The response from the pews was immediate. Some asked what was going on. Without elaborating, the pastor indicated they were struggling and deserved support. In a church that barely functioned as community and rarely came together (symbolically, all 12 Board members lived in different zip codes), the church was suddenly becoming as one, at least to this couple.

The effect was dramatic. With people asking how they could help, without prying, no longer was the couple alone in their struggle. Melinda’s ties to her co-worker were placed in the context of the vows of marriage, the well-being of a family, and life lived before God. Though it didn’t happen easily, Melinda steadily withdrew from her liaison before more damage was done.

Through the faith community rallying unwittingly around them, Melinda’s perspective shifted. She was unhappy about it, but she did go back to work within her marriage. Room for forgiveness was somehow found when it didn’t exist before.

Feeling as though prayers had been answered, Nick was grateful, and wanted to make the most of having another chance. Melinda and Nick stayed together in a marriage as imperfect as most (though years later, they divorced). And they remained active in the church.

But curiously, in spite of this marital reconciliation, Melinda and Denise blamed the pastor for her eight-word public prayer on the couple's behalf. They found it deeply unfair that Melinda had to resolve this situation other than in complete secrecy. When queried, the pastor pointed out that Melinda had asked for a divorce (a public act), and Nick had requested public prayer. And the truth was that Nick needed help, even if Melinda desired her secrecy.

Denise met with the pastor to air grievances. She felt slighted for her sister. The pastor had let them down. The pastor calmly answered that if being disliked was the cost of salvaging a marriage, she would gladly pay it. The pastor also said that Denise had let her sister down by providing so little spiritual leadership. Melinda needed more from her than: "do sincerely whatever you feel you must." Soon after, Denise left the church, complaining that the pastor talked too much about Jesus.

### **On Freedom and Dignity**

This story reveals the forces buffeting us, and what is at stake in the struggle. Marriage is a microcosm of final allegiances, a stage where many spiritual battles between the Gospel and the powers are played out.

Have you ever noticed how we are capable of imagining ourselves most free at just the moment when we are most deeply enslaved? In this we are all Melinda. America has a painfully tragic flirtation with freedom. America confuses freedom as it worships it. And then it resents—in the name of "being true to ourselves"—any needed corrective.

America teaches that the essence of freedom is the unfettered power to choose. The more choices there are, the more freedom there is. America cuts its teeth on this creed. And once the field of choices focuses and narrows, the natural consequence of moving through life, freedom feels lost. People then panic because they are "missing out on life." Is it any wonder why "mid-life crises" loom so large for so many? In

effect, these sham crises are programmed into our common life by how we mislead each other on freedom and dignity.

Comedian George Carlin observed that most of our choices are about things that mean little (earrings for sale in accessory stores). He insists that we have little choice in things that matter most (whether or not we will go to war). Carlin is right. Who among us chose our DNA, or the families into which we were born?

Carlin claims an inverse relationship here. The more important something is, the less choice we have. But multiplying options on long-distance providers and internet servers creates an illusion of freedom, of boundless options, of zero boundaries, of unlimited access, as advertising campaigns everywhere scream these days.

As Christians, we are invited to live out another story. More essential than anything we have chosen is the world-changing reality that *God has definitively chosen us* through Jesus' birth and life, his death and resurrection. We could have never imagined so great a destiny.

"You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another" (John 15:6-17). I always read these words to new church members as we receive them. They are words of ultimate comfort, of final good news. What we cannot do for ourselves, God has graciously done for us. Whatever battles we must enter, we engage them knowing the larger war has been won.

The American tragedy is the instinctive rejection of the best thing that could have happened, God's answer to the gnawing ache of hungry souls. Why this rebuff? We reject God's response to what ails us because *it was not of our personal choosing*. Because God's gracious response to our despair was not of our deciding and only unwittingly of our "execution."

Similarly, isn't it telling how Christian America notes the moment of its salvation from the time when we "accepted Jesus as personal Lord and Savior"? Why this moment instead of when the only Son saw fit to die ignominiously for us on Calvary? Simple. It is because we see our choice as more important than God's. When Christians ask me when I was "saved," I say

2000 years ago upon a hill outside Jerusalem. Then I ask, “Why do you ask? When were *you* saved?”

Nothing offends more than grace. Our much-vaunted choice gives us the illusion of reign, the image of control. Our motto is better to reign in hell than to serve in paradise. But we are not the masters of our destiny, the shapers of the future. We can accept or reject God’s gifts of grace, like any other good gift. But we cannot replicate or substitute anything vaguely like it. This will never change. Humankind proposes, God disposes. These are the terms of living.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you. I appointed you to go and bear fruit.” These words do not massage our democratic sensibilities. We can rework the terms of church By-Laws and Constitutions, but we cannot alter the charter of our salvation. And little scandalizes Christian people more than the suggestion that God’s reign is not a democracy of equal partnership. It is not one God, one person, one vote. God has cast the only vote that matters. And it happened without a caucus, other than the one that chose Barabbas over Jesus outside of Pilate’s praetorium. God’s reign is not a democracy, but a Christocracy.

“*Being free to*” is but one part of the Christian vision of freedom. We are also aware of how essential “*being free from*” worshipping false gods is. Unwitting idolatry is a wasted life of abject enslavement and pointless servitude. These gods are legion around us, from Nike to Nextel, from Bloomberg to BMW. In the final analysis, these gods don’t really have any power, because they are not true God. They would seem to offer the best of life, but lead to the culture of death.

For Christians, “*being free to*” is deeply qualified by “*being free from*” and “*being free for.*” For us freedom is not a guaranteed right. It is not inherently bestowed as our possession by nature. Rather it is a costly gift purchased with precious blood. It issues not out of how we see ourselves, or our place at the top of the food chain, but out of God’s nature. Freedom has little to do with the control that revels in choice. Freedom arises out of the encounter with the true and living God. Freedom begins in Jesus’ loving sacrifice to seek the best for us and for the world before seeking for himself.

## **Where Submission is Not a Dirty Word**

In matters of authority and freedom, to stick with our marriage metaphor, I am reminded of fresh-faced couples who approach me, hoping that I will preside at their wedding service. When we plan that service, I give them a brochure suggesting biblical texts having to do with marriage, and ask which they would select as most fitting.

Nestled among the more romantic and rhapsodic Biblical texts are others that have never been selected. Texts like Ephesians 5:22-28 and Colossians 3:18-19. Texts where Paul the Apostle enjoins wives to subject themselves to their husbands and husbands to love their wives with the same submissive love with which Jesus has loved us.

If one word makes the hair on back of the neck stand up it is the word *submit*. Americans submit to nobody. Here, to submit is to be dominated and to forfeit freedom. To submit is to lose the dignity of shaping our own lives according to our own tastes.

Yet for Christians, submission is not ugly, but beautiful. It is our ultimate end. In song after song, the Psalmist longs to bring his will into accord with the Lord's. The effect verges on ecstatic. Paul meant nothing less harmonious as he urged the submission of wives to husbands, and only somewhat less pointedly, husbands submitting to wives.

What Paul is getting at in these words is the delicate art of mutual accountability that every great marriage must seek. As couples get this right—each finding joy by looking to the well-being of the other before self, each finding freedom with the invincible trust this creates, each finding equality on bended knee before God—marriage becomes what it should. It becomes high and noble. For Christians, submission to God in Jesus Christ and being subject to one another in mutual accountability is not tyranny but true freedom.

All this falls hard on our ears, having been told that it is up to us to decide what our lives mean and to let our dreams rule. Yet true freedom is becoming the people God meant us to be, not living the American dream. We find true freedom as we conform to God's will. We awaken to new realities and transforming possibilities. We become better than when left to

our own devices. Freedom, it seems, is found in unexpected places where we would never look.

### **A Story: When Conforming Becomes Transforming**

My confirmation at age 14 was the result of two years' study, prayer, and church involvement. All fifteen of us deserved our reputation as "the worst confirmation class" the pastors ever had. We were unruly and inattentive, obtuse and defiant. We made it clear that we were there only because of our parents. For us the class was a joke.

As Confirmation Sunday approached, Pastor Clemens smiled a smile of mild retributive justice. The church had only the vaguest idea how much trouble we had been. But when we stood before the entire church on Confirmation Sunday, nothing could be hidden. Our Lutheran tradition meant a Confirmation Sunday format where formidable Augsburg-like doctrinal questions were put to us and we immediately answered with pre-memorized deep, coherent, and considered answers. If we were unprepared or belligerent, as we had been not infrequently in class, it would be evident to the whole church. There could be no such cop-outs on Confirmation Sunday.

Late in the year, we met after class and decided that our only chance of avoiding shame was to learn these assigned responses dead solid perfect and smile radiantly in our white robes. No whining. No excuses. No exceptions. We administered peer pressure to these ends. We even stooped to helping friends to learn their catechetical responses.

Confirmation Sunday arrived and our plan unfolded seamlessly. We were such wise angels for being so young! Only once did a confirmand even hesitate. The congregation concluded we were rascals who truly loved God, while the clergy scratched their heads.

Turning the tables on the ministers and redeeming ourselves before the people turned out to be less of a thrill than we expected. Instead another unexpected satisfaction arose. Despite ourselves, we unwittingly mastered much of the core teaching of what it means to follow Jesus. Having already seen our responses illustrated by innumerable examples within that congregation, it took deeper root in us than we would have supposed. We became better than we deserved by standing on

our own feet where we had been sleepwalking. We had taken matters in hand and risen to the occasion. We had become young men and women. This felt like real freedom.

If this transformed us—and it did me—it happened because we first conformed. All of this was possible because at the peak of America’s defiance (1968), at the apex of personal rebellion (age 14), we had conformed to a will and story higher than our own. It was shocking how the act of submitting to the authority of a community better and holier than ourselves authorized us to become who God intended us to be.

### **Our Dreams and God’s Dream**

If anything is sacrosanct in America, it is the consistent message of parents to youth that they are obligated to become whatever their hearts desire. What is more American than the little “you can become anything you want!” talk? My own Boomer generation retreated into utopian communes, then staggered back into the mainstream when we ran out of money, direction, and ideals. Today’s youth flirt with adolescent ideals—I’ll become a marine biologist to save the dolphins—then flock to the corporate executive track. Taught to chase their own dreams, they finally follow the money!

The first problem with letting our meager dreams drive our life’s direction is that we so lack imagination. We lack awareness of the full range of options not only for our own lives, but most especially for what wonders and miracles might transpire in the world. Our dreams may sound grand and far-fetched, but they are usually too small. What makes them seem grand is only our exalted part in them—the money, the fame, the success, and the power. Truly great dreams come only where the church grabs us with a vision of God’s kingdom.

For example, it never would have occurred to a Yugoslavian girl that she could alter the world’s willingness to love our neighbor by caring for the dying in the streets of Calcutta. That is monumental. It took the Christian community of the Church in all of its compassion and loving-kindness to suggest such a thing could happen. The church made Mother Teresa.

It never would have occurred to a lanky Alabama lad that he might spearhead efforts to eliminate poverty housing in the

world by rallying the rich and poor together to build with no-interest loans. That is prodigious. It took the Christian community of the Church, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, to make Millard Fuller (founder of Habitat for Humanity).

America is a dream factory like no other place on earth. It is too bad that the dreams we buy and sell are so absorbed with ourselves and individual greatness. This is why our dreams are so small. As the Evil One has divided us up, he has conquered. The good news is God has a bigger dream. The New Testament advances this dream. An incredibly large portion of the Gospels announces and describes the establishment of the kingdom of God.

This kingdom or reign of God is nothing other than God's dream for all of the earth. It represents a deep longing for right relationship as primeval as Eden. It takes into account everything dark and forbidding that has happened since then. God's dream or kingdom represents the consummation of 4000 years of God trying to win us back and create a lasting peace. It is as personal as every one of us in our uniqueness; it leaves no one behind. It brings power to make right what we cannot correct. It is a still unfolding drama of redemption. And we all have a key role that none other can occupy.

More than anything, what keeps us from finding our place in the dream of God's reign is the American prejudice that it is all up to us to decide what our lives mean, to author and shape our personal dream. Until we let go of personal dreams of glory, we cannot participate in God's dream. If we cannot subject our personal dreams to God's holy dream, we are captive. America's dream of autonomy collides with Jesus' dream of the kingdom. One holds us captive; the other sets us free.

### **A Story: When Dreams Collide**

Where do dreams—human and divine—gather and collide more forcefully than around weddings? When I began my ministry, I saw weddings as a means of grace to introduce newcomers to the Gospel, and to invite them into life within Christian community.

So if couples expressed even the vaguest interest in these matters, I would agree to do the wedding. But couples will say

most anything in order to use the Church as backdrop for wedding fantasies entertained since childhood. After staging the Ken and Barbie dream extravaganza, their polite respect often shifted to disregard or rudeness. After a few years, I realized that couples were expecting something of the church, and getting it, but the church was expecting nothing of these couples, and therefore getting nothing. Something was wrong.

I counseled with leading laypersons about this state of affairs. We decided to focus on couples who were already united with a Christian church (and might need to be married in our locality) or couples willing to unite with a church. It didn't have to be our church (avoiding religious imperialism). But they had to indicate to the pastor of the new church their intentions to unite. This guarded the church from abuse and kept me from feeling like a cult prostitute. I applied the policy even-handedly, even for the grown children of the local church I served. After all, the wedding liturgy everywhere presumed couples living in Christian community. Why not express this up front?

Among the inquiring calls I received for weddings was one from a daughter of our congregation, then living in California. This young woman, I learned, had been something of a wild child. But she was now settling down and making a life. We had a pleasant conversation and she was excited about life with her fiancée. She asked me what she needed to do to be married at her home church. Aside from the obvious meetings to counsel and plan the wedding, all that we asked was that they attend to the spiritual foundation of their marriage by finding a local church where they might worship and serve. This needed attention before we could plan the wedding.

At this point our conversation became less animated. She pointed out that her husband didn't have a church background and he might resist; that they might well be moving in the not-too-distant future; that right now they were leading busy lives and needed Sunday mornings to rest. I responded that she didn't merely want a church wedding, but a marriage with Christ as their covenant partner. And this was all but impossible separated from others seeking the same.

She promised to think about it. But I never heard from her again. Basically, they made plans to be wed in a church that didn't ask anything of them. This was hard on her, but much

harder on her parents, who were among the strongest Christians in that church. I had worked closely with her father as the chief lay officer of the church. They were stalwart friends of my predecessor and yet fully opened their arms and respected me as a callow 30 year-old “Senior Minister.” They had guided and comforted me in impossible circumstances. Now, I could feel how sorely disappointed they were with me. They could have driven me out of that church with a wave of their hand, but instead— without completely grasping it—they bowed to what we were attempting as a congregation.

Weeks later, rather than avoid this ache, I called the father to ask how things were. “I’m all right. But you might speak with her mother. She is still broken up.” Not only did they receive my pastoral care, they supported me as I stumbled along, and continued like nothing happened. Their rare demonstration of loyalty to Christ’s church still stands as a bright light. The faith of people who would submit to the church’s spiritual authority as bigger than themselves is humbling indeed. I am not certain that I did the right thing by extending the wedding policy so far. Since then, I have slightly softened it. But the story does raise fundamental questions.

What do we do as Christians when personal dreams clash with the claims of God’s dream? Does the church have the authority to expect anything of those who fill its pews? Or are they religious consumers where the customer is always right? What happens when we wade into these waters and don’t get it quite right?

### **Where We Are Right Now**

Increasingly, without having yet articulated it, we are realizing that this land of personal affluence and global influence is not what we were yearning for. And it is even farther removed from the biblical vision of our destiny. We hear echoes of that as persons in places of power step down to pursue callings as artists, as couples making money hand over fist exit the fast lane, retire early, and simplify, as youths swarm World Trade Organization conferences and plead, “How much is enough?”

People of faith are more aware that we cannot serve two or three masters. We are asking to whom we finally belong? Which claims upon our lives are binding and which are

negotiable? Where do we take our bearings? Under which reign are we finally citizens? It is a question that we answer every time we take our children to the soccer tournament instead of to the confirmation retreat; every time we book the luxury cruise and toss whatever income we have left over toward God's purposes; every time we feather our own well-feathered nest at the expense of faceless workers losing jobs; every time we shop for a more agreeable church as issues like these surface. Such tensions are not far beneath glossy, polite surfaces.

Where are our allegiances? The story of Michael Jordan and the USA Olympic Dream Team winning the gold medal for basketball in Barcelona comes to mind. The image of His Airness was emblazoned all over the city. There was so little suspense about the Dream Team winning, it was almost a relief when it was all over. But when the medal ceremony was held, there was a flap. Jordan was threatening not to rise for the national anthem. Was it the plight of the Rwandans he was lifting up? The lack of health care for black children? No, Jordan was asserting his right to replace his Reeboks with his trademark Nikes for the anthem. Ah yes, the almighty endorsement contract.

Doesn't such loyalty warm your heart? That is how rare and precious our relentless self-interest renders conviction. We might ask ourselves what endorsement contracts have we ourselves invisibly signed?

This haunted landscape—rich in things, but poor in soul—might seem fertile ground for the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as an alternative to the wealthy, successful, and civilized despair around us. And the good news now is precisely that.

With American society pushing the Church away, with the steady advance of the USA as secular state, the Church now has the chance to offer a new life in God's realm under the reign of Christ in a way that does offer something completely different. Indeed the opportunity now exists for the Gospel of Jesus Christ to come alive among us in a manner that has not been possible for many centuries.

But let us not get too far ahead of ourselves. For we cannot underestimate the extent to which the forces at work within our society have effectively relegated this news of Jesus

Christ crucified and resurrected to the realm of bland myths. As someone has said, you and I live in a country where Elvis is alive, but Jesus is dead.

“Practical atheism” is much more subtle than outwardly denying God. Practical atheism means living as though there is no God (see Titus 1:16), at least no living breathing God, even if our lives still do show the devotional trappings of “spirituality.” Practical atheism means praising God with our lips but kowtowing to every other force that comes down the pike—job, team, family, media, celebrity. Practical atheism renders God powerless. It means that we must back off and smile obediently just when our discipleship requires us to rub the fur of other entities in the wrong direction. Practical atheism makes Christianity always about being “nice,” about preserving the status quo. Do we have any room to complain about encroaching secularism if we live lives of practical atheism?

Let’s be honest. Today the Church is not taken seriously as an agent of transformation. The Church reflects the consensus of the status quo rather than molding it. If only we could walk and plant our feet as though Jesus is alive and at work among us in a way equaling the vigor of the Easter Day celebrations that we annually offer. Then the Church of Christ would again be restored as player rather than patsy.

Frankly, the Christian faith is perceived more as ally to these problems than real alternative to them. Likely the biggest reason for being relegated to bit player in the conversation about the nature and purpose of human life is our failure to live the Gospel’s transforming power in ways that evoke a holier reign. We have not modeled Jesus’ alternative order with living, breathing Christ-like practices. He warned us about our salt losing its saltiness.

### **The Purposes of this Booklet**

Do American Christians desire to be mastered by God’s will in any soul-stirring and meaningful way, obeying God not because we must, but because our joy and glory are found there? Or do we merely consult with God in passing, expecting God to sanctify whatever we’ve already planned to do? How can the Gospel of cross and resurrection move from bland and bygone

myth to the central story around which life is sorted? The answer is spiritual authority.

The words “spiritual authority” typically conjure up fears about the Spanish Inquisition, Salem witch trials, or the Crusades. But true spiritual authority is not coercive much less violent. Following Jesus is about dying to ourselves that God might rule, rather than killing others to run things ourselves. Jesus reminded us that we cannot wield authority as the world does (Matthew 20:25-28).

Spiritual authority is not about the power to command. It is about finding a scope and purpose for our lives larger than our individual selves. It is about finding ourselves in living community rather than lonely isolation. It is about living the life God meant for us. This is spiritual authority. And in a world choking on the vainglory of self-worship, worshipping God in Jesus Christ represents our only real chance for a revolution of good.

There is a story about a visitor to the magnificent Uffizzi art museum in Florence. After viewing the works, he emerged only to declare, “I don’t think much of the stuff in there!” Overhearing the remark, a janitor replied, “Sir, it is not the pictures but the visitors who are on trial here.” So also with us and our times: God calls the church gently but forthrightly to turn from the false freedoms of these times to the glorious possibility of living our lives before the true and living God. But first we must recover who we are by living under spiritual authority. Only then will we find our voice, venture forth boldly, and respond like Peter, John and Stephen, doing the “greater signs and wonders” Jesus called us to do (John 14:12).

### **Your Church: Backbone Without Arrogance**

Likely the most creative question the Church can ask today is: where can we put God ahead of priorities that have slowly but consistently crowded God to the margins of our lives? How can we reassert God’s preferences and sovereignty in places where other concerns have quietly crept in and now rule how things get done? Instead of accommodating our discipleship to family vacations, fashion magazines, sports teams, declarations of the State Department, policies of public schools, how can we speak to them from a place they have not

recently heard? The place where the reign of God is the dream we are living out of rather than the bloated dreams of individuals trying to make their mark before dying?

The churches that find their way into this question, and follow Jesus Christ with deep and coherent replies, are the churches that will lead God's people well into the next millennium.

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