



The Brand

The internet and new gospel partnerships fueled church growth in the early 2000s, but bigger isn't always better.

SHOW NOTES

Mark Driscoll rose to prominence in the early days of the internet. Unlike his megapastor predecessors like Robert Schuller and Bill Hybels, Driscoll harnessed technology to build his brand and bypass cultural gatekeepers who might hinder or influence his success. He formed a talented media team to expand his reach and, inadvertently, reinforce his ego through an online presence. Quickly though, his star rose too far, keeping him at arm's length from the collaboration and counsel of those who could lend wisdom to his youthful, combustive pastoral ministry.

In this episode of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, host Mike Cospere breaks down how technology shaped the messaging and marketing of Mark Driscoll and how personal brand can isolate a leader even as it fuels a ministry's growth. Cospere interviews broadly, from Mars Hill media team members to Collin Hansen of The Gospel Coalition, to investigate how narcissism grows, how theological movements birth new leaders, and why the church's love affair with charisma and certainty demands we develop a better moral imagination. Rethink your admiration for celebrity pastors. Reevaluate your attraction to religious trends. And, reflect on your own willingness to stand "sola" when church becomes about something other than the Gospel.

MASTHEAD

“The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill” is a production of Christianity Today

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Brian Zug: I look back and I'm like, Okay, who platformed the aggression algorithm of Facebook, right, that makes money off of conflict.

🐦 @MikeCasper

Mike Cospers: This is Brian Zug. Since the mid-1990s, Brian has been working at the leading edge of technology and design on the internet. He first started building websites in 1995, and these days he works in user experience and organizational change. He has a unique interest in the ethics of tech development and entrepreneurship.

🐦 @bryanzug

Brian Zug: There's a lot of freaking regret among those of us who built things like WordPress and CMS's and Twitter and Facebook. We were hopeful people and we didn't see how these things could be used for evil.

Mike Cospers: For Brian, there's a very particular kind of regret. He discovered Mars Hill in 1999, after hearing about this church in Seattle with a website and a chat board. This was a real oddity at the time, particularly the unmoderated and sometimes unhinged conversations on the message board. When he moved to Seattle a little later, he ended up attending and he met his wife, Jen, there, who was actually Mark's first administrative assistant. He began helping out where he could, including with the website.

Brian Zug: I'm the person that put the first MP3 on a Mars Hill site back in 2000. I'm like, Hey guys, you hear of these MP3 things, we can put audio on the internet, would that be amazing for Jesus? But that grew into this thing that's happening at the same time where you can track those numbers. So you could see and it's almost like this really quick feedback loop that the internet brought and digital media brought, where I can make an aggression and then I can see my numbers go up. Oh, well, I just got a dopamine hit. And so the aggression becomes a justification for the ends.

Mike Cospers: You could frame the Mars Hill story, like much of the story of the internet age, as a story about unintended consequences. When you talk to early adopters of the church, they'll tell you that no one expected the church to go to the size or the influence that it did. When you talk to outsiders who platformed or published Mark Driscoll, none of them expected or knew that they were enabling a toxic and abusive culture in the church. With the internet in particular, the reach that Mars Hill would accomplish was certainly not part of the plan and not something anyone would have imagined back in the year 2000.

Brian Zug: I thought Mark looked at the internet the way I did that, that it's a collaboration platform, not a broadcast platform. And when it became clear that he thought it was a broadcast, and command and control - and his value of leading was command and control. I was like, Oh, [CENSORED] what hath we wrought? We have enabled and platformed somebody who does not have the maturity to navigate this. So in a sense, I'm like, did I give Mark Driscoll his first hit of heroin by platforming him in the way that it's killed him and created a kind of opioid epidemic that follows him from Seattle to Scottsdale and all over the place, and then gets replicated by his mini Marks around that want to be like Mark. Thank God the grace of Jesus is ridiculous and it's all gonna work out. But like, that's a heavy thing to think through and a lot of the work I do these days is like, Okay, how can we use these platforms for flourishing?

Mike Cospers: It's easy to lose sight of Mars Hill as a local church story. For most of us,

when the church collapsed it amounted to one more headline, of the sort we've heard before. In Seattle, though, the impact was far more devastating. And so the question for people like Brian is, What part did I play in the pain and the sorrow of my neighbors? How much did the work that I did in platforming Mark pour accelerant on something destined to be a fire from the beginning, or how much did it change its trajectory and make it inevitable? Most likely, if it hadn't been Brian, it would have been someone platforming Mark, because there's no shortage of people eager to shine a spotlight on young talent. Remember, by this time Mark had already been flying around the country and speaking at conferences. And still, if you're one of the guys there at the beginning that helped spread that influence, it weighs heavy on your mind.

Brian Zug: If I'm introducing to myself that knows anything about Mars Hill, I say, I'm the guy that put the first MP3 on the Mars Hill site. I'm sorry.

Mike Cospers: From Christianity Today, this is Mike Cospers, and you're listening to the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. It's the story of one church that grew from a handful of people to a movement and then collapsed almost overnight. It's a story about power, fame, and spiritual trauma, problems faced across the spectrum of churches in America today. And yet, it's also a story about the mystery of God working in broken places. Today, Episode Six, The Brand.

It wasn't easy to become Robert Schuller. As we talked about on Episode Two, Schuller went from preaching on top of a concession stand at a drive-in movie theater in the 1950s, to being broadcast to more than a million households around the globe on the Hour of Power. But that took decades. The reach was astonishing for its time, and it came because of his talent and charisma and persona and hard work. And in no small part because of the encouragement and connections of his friend, Billy Graham. The Trinity broadcast network, or TBN, was another avenue through which a pastor could become a celebrity.

Announcer: This is the Trinity Broadcasting Network.


Mike Cospers: Their story is one of launching in fits and starts in the 1970s. And once they got a foothold, they did find a massive global audience, but consider what it took. They had to spend millions of dollars buying television stations, slowly amassing their broadcast empire over decades. There were, of course, other ways of becoming a celebrity pastor. There were other TV stations, there was radio, there were magazines and publishers who could get behind your work and get you out there.

But with each of these came gatekeepers, program managers, executives, editors. People whose interests included the quality of the work and their company brand, which meant looking for certain kinds of content and certain personalities. While there was a big audience, it meant that the pathways for reaching that audience were scarce.

All that changes, of course, with the advent of the internet. You can see how the internet changes things as early as 1996, when an unheard-of website out of a one bedroom apartment in Hollywood was the first news outlet to announce that Bob Dole had chosen Jack Kemp to be his running mate. The site was called the Drudge report, and

in 1998, Drudge would also be the first to publish about Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. In the case of the Clinton story, other outlets already had it, but the editors, the gatekeepers, killed it. Drudge hit publish and became a phenom, and his site remains influential today. There's a long list of others who used the internet to bypass gatekeepers on their way to fame: Perez Hilton starting his blog in 2004; Bo Burnham uploading a couple of goofy songs in 2006; Justin Bieber's mom posting videos of him in 2007. The flattened broadcast yourself world of the internet made audiences accessible in ways that were unimaginable a decade before.

And that brings us to Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill. It's an interesting thought experiment to consider whether he'd have found as big an audience as he did, if in order to get to them, he had to make his way past gatekeepers at radio stations, publishers, or television stations. Yes, of course he did get published, but the publishing came after he established his platform online. And that happened because of a lot of creative innovation. People like Brian Zug, who was in Seattle because of the tech industry, and other young creatives, like Jesse Bryan.

 @jessebryan

Jesse Bryan: I remember liking that he was funny, and that he was irreverent. Because for me, church was never interesting. Like, my mom - did her best, mom tried - she was way into it and no Pantera, no whatever. No Smurfs even when I was a kid. When I was in high school, I had a job, I was hanging siding. And so my mom came to me one day and said, Either you go back to church or you move out, and I moved out. I moved out when I was in high school just because I didn't want to go to church. That's how little interest I had. Like, when Mark used to say things like, potpourri in the bathroom and it's just a bunch of old folks, and stuff like that, I was like a hundred percent. The only thing I knew about the church was dumb stuff. It was like, it was literally when I was kid, it was like Psalty, Sandy Patty, really hard things for me to connect with. So when I hit the point where I could at least afford rent in a crappy apartment, I was like, That's better than going.

Mike Cosper: Jesse first discovered Mars Hill in the late nineties while he was in college. After he graduated, he was in and out of Seattle shooting videos for bands and creating online content for a big corporate brand.

10 MIN

Jesse Bryan: While I was there, Apple came to us and said, We're going to launch this new device where you can have videos on your, like, iPods. It was the first one that you could actually watch videos on. And you wouldn't see it, but they pretty much gave us dimensions for shooting. And the reason why they told us that is when they launched the new iPod, they wanted people to be able to go to iTunes and see videos.

One of the weekends I was in Seattle shooting those things, I was over at a friend's house who was renting a room from a guy named AJ - who was a pastor of the church - and became friends with AJ, and he came down to the place I was working and he was like, this is super cool. And I was like, I told him about this new thing that's coming out and we're really excited about it, and he was like, That's really interesting. And I told him, I was like, who I think would be really good on video is Mark. I think Mark would be really good on video. I'd never met Mark before, I had just been in the back of the room or whatever. And he was like, Oh, that's cool. He was like, You should do that for us. And I was like, No, why would I? I was like, I'm not going to do that, but I'm just telling you,

when this thing launches, whoever the first church is that has a video in this ecosystem will probably do really well. And then there was something, I don't know what I did wrong, but I woke up the next morning after he said that, and it was like if you used to like a kind of food and then you woke up one day and you're like, I don't like that anymore. Like, the taste for touring and working in the kind of directing music, videos of stuff, that kind of stuff I was doing, completely left my mouth, and I was like, I really want to go work at this little church, which is the wildest thing and I don't know why that happened. And man, I wish it didn't.

Mike Cospser: I've thought a lot about this comment since he and I spoke, and I think it's revealing. If you had an experience like this and went on to serve a church that loved its neighbors, shared the gospel, married and buried and cared for people in crisis, you'd account for a moment like that by saying, It seems like the hand of God, right, waking up Samuel in the middle of the night. But that's not the Mars Hill story; far from it. And in the aftermath of the fall of Mars Hill and the fall of any church, you can't look back at moments like this without seeing it through the devastated landscape of the years to come. To be sure, those are my words, not Jesse's. And maybe that says as much about my own experience as it does anyone else's. But I do think this is a good example of how after you've lived through an experience like Mars Hill, a lot of the trite religious language that gets thrown around doesn't work anymore.

Jesse Bryan: When I showed up to work, they had a broken tripod and an XLI, which is an old Canon, like mini DV camera. And I asked him, I said, where's the rest of the team, and where's the rest of the gear. And he's like, there isn't any. And I was like, you're kidding me. I don't shoot. Like I was directed, I don't shoot and I don't edit. And he was like, Figure it out. And I was like, Oh man, I just really screwed up. And I was right.

Mike Cospser: Jesse started working at Mars Hill in 2005, and over time he'd influence everything from social media content to how sermon series were packaged, even how Mark presented himself.

Jesse Bryan: First, Mark was behind this wall of people or whatever, and they made you jump... It was just dumb. It was just like, Oh, you want to meet with Mark, on his terms or whatever. And I was like, whatever. I didn't know him as a celebrity; he wasn't. He was a dude wearing like dumb... He was wearing like affliction T-shirts, like a puka shell necklace, and he just looked like those dudes in high school that I didn't like. He's like a jock, always talking about baseball and stuff, which is the opposite of where I was coming from. But he was so funny, because he would just crack me up. Because he would say all the stuff nobody else wanted to say, and that was entertaining. The masculine stuff was so masculine, it was almost like a BBC show or something like that, like over the top. So I finally started talking to Mark and we started hanging out, and it was just stuff like, Dude, you gotta stop wearing this stuff, man. Like, you look... I don't think this is what you're going for. Really simple stuff now that I look back, it's all branding. It's like, we've got to streamline this brand a little bit.

Mike Cospser: When you look at what Jesse and his team built in terms of their design, their web presence, all the different streams of communication, you'll see that it truly was at the bleeding edge of its time. They had a get there first attitude. So Brian Zug

gets them up on podcasts in the early years, and Jesse gets them up on vodcasts right as Apple is launching the service. Another one of Jessie's early contributions was to help them rethink the way they branded and marketed sermon series. Like everything else at Mars Hill, their approach was informed by a reactionary spirit.

Jesse Bryan: I always really hated church branding. It's the worst thing in the world. They were doing stuff where it's like they were taking pop culture and then they were trying to add like a Christian flare, which was ridiculous.

So they would take things... Like if a Superman movie came out, they'd do something like Jesus, the real Superman or whatever. I hated that stuff. I hated it with a passion. I looked at that and I was like, These are lazy artists who do garbage work and have no perspective. And that's when we started talking about, If you're using culture first and foremost for your content, you will always be three or four years behind. That's where we talked about, if you're waiting to take a popular movie now and repackage it around your particular agenda, not only are you doing a disservice to the artist that made the original piece, but it also means you're just sucking the tailpipe of culture. You're mimicking a culture when you should be creating a culture.

And so things like that. So the perspective of the brand started getting narrower and narrower, and it started to... We had mantras there. We'd say things like, Clarity over creativity. But we started thinking about things where it's like, Hey, if you have a sermon series called, Jesus, the real Superman, 10 years from now, somebody looks at your archive, they're not going to have any idea what you're talking about. So here's what we should do instead. Let's just call it Genesis, subtitle. Let's just call it Acts, subtitle, Ruth, subtitle. And it was really smart too, because it also helped us, in retrospect, SEO and all that fun stuff. So it became like this... One of the things we always used to say was like, the answer has to be in the text. We should be creating all the content based on what we find in the text, not some artificial thing on the outside happening in culture. And so all of these things started happening. We started tying in not only the brand, but we started thinking through... It's funny, I didn't even think about that till I just said that, but the fact that's why our rankings and all this stuff started going up is we started building this really consistent media channels. And literally our focus started shifting, and then really after that, all we were thinking about was our online audience.

Mike Cosper: To put that into context, he's talking about the media and communications team. That doesn't necessarily apply to campus pastors, community group leaders, counselors, and other staff. Most of whom were still trying to do what churches normally do on local levels.

But with that said, you can follow budget and spending trends and see that over time resources got more and more centralized, more invested in Mark's platform, media and the online reach of the church. And because of that favored status, Jesse's time at Mars Hill and his interactions with Mark looked very different than other people's.

Jesse Bryan: Every time I asked for something, he gave it to me. When I say we were pushing things, we had three red cameras - which is a type of camera, it's like the cameras they shot Lord of the Rings on - we had three red cameras. When NBC, as an orga-

nization, owned two, I wanted full-on, like, cinema glass; I got it. Mark would go out and he would raise the money. It's like, We need a studio, Mark would build it for us. By the time I left, the media team was over 60 people. So we had a sound stage, we had a professional recording studio. We had a person on staff and their entire job was just doing film scores. So when I say they let us take this all the way, they let us take this all the way.

Mike Cosper: When something's been successful, it's tempting to think that the outcome was the plan from the beginning. In this case, you might think if you went into Driscoll's study in the early 2000s, there would have been a war map for how he was going to take over the city. Now, to be sure, there actually was eventually a block-by-block map of the city, where their members were and how they were expanding, but that all came later.

It began almost by accident with people like Brian Zug asking, Have you heard of this MP3 thing, or Jesse Bryan just feeling compelled to quit his job and help this little church.

Jesse Bryan: If Mark said he had a vision for that, he'd be lying. No one anticipated any of that stuff. And for me, at least, it was like... I was 23. So it was like, Oh, here's my friend, he's really funny, he says crazy stuff, whatever. But dude, check this out, when we package this. Oh, that's kind of crazy. Oh, I wonder if he did this. And then it just kept going. And it's like, Hey, can we do original scores? Sure. Really? Oh, crazy. Okay, cool. Hey, can we start to do XYZ thing? Sure. Hey, can we build a studio? You got. If we had a batting cage and skateboards... It was like, it was literally a shredder's lair. It was like, we were doing all this crazy stuff and it was working, and none of us were thinking about the repercussions because we never saw them. It's like if we were pumping CO2 in the atmosphere, and because we didn't live in Antarctica, we weren't seeing the ice caps melt. So it wasn't until later when it started to become a global thing and we started traveling hard that you started going, Oh, dang, people are listening, and they're changing their lives based on the stuff that we thought about for about two seconds.

Mike Cosper: Jesse and most of the members of his team tell a similar story of their experience. They're drawn in by a church culture. That makes sense to them for the first time. They're caught up in a combination of strength, personality and ideological certainty that comes from a person like Mark. And once the connection gets made in your head that this guy's vision is God's vision for Seattle, for the church, for you as an individual, you're willing to sacrifice almost anything for it.

20 MIN

Setting aside a promising career, living well underpaid, taking on a mortgage you can't afford because the church needs homeowners. Meanwhile, your wife can't work or else you lose credibility as a leader. And that says nothing about the sweat, blood and tears you poured into the actual work of the ministry. So when you wake up to realize the brand you've been building isn't actually all about Jesus, it's about this guy, it's incredibly disorienting.

Jesse Bryan: We were in London and Mark had sold out Royal Albert Hall, which is this really fancy place. And at the end of the show or sermon or whatever, we were at a back of house and we got in the taxi cab, and the taxis in London, you have like jump seats

where they look at each other. So it was Mark and my friend, and then myself, and I was sitting in the jump seat with the taxi driver behind me. And there was these guys outside of the venue and they wanted Mark's autograph and to take a picture with him. Like at the back door, almost like fans. And we hop in there and I looked at Mark and I said, How crazy is that? Those dudes are trying to get your autograph and a photo, I mean, you're just a pastor. And he looked at me and he said, I don't know if you've noticed or not, but I'm kind of a big deal. I thought he was quoting Anchorman so I started laughing, and I looked at my friend who was next to him and he shook his head, like he was dead serious. And he shook his head, like, Dude, he's not joking. And Mark wasn't joking. And I was like, Oh man, we're in trouble.

Mike Cosper: Here's Chuck DeGroot, author of *When Narcissism Comes to Church*.

 @chuckdegroat

Chuck DeGroot: Unlike the narcissist, who's able to find that narcissistic gear inside, that confidence, that grandiosity that he projects, unlike the narcissistic leader, the follower doesn't think that he's capable of finding it himself. He thinks that he needs to attach to another, attach to a movement. This is what you see in cults. This is what we're seeing, I think, today in our world as people sort of gather around particular people, particular movements, and attach themselves to it for a sense of power. I feel small, I feel insignificant, I feel like I'm lacking. I don't feel like people are taking my story seriously. But when I attach myself to the movement, to the figure, now I feel strong. I feel large. I feel important. And so there's a psychological need being met. When that's disconnected - for instance, in some of these stories that we've seen from Mars Hill to Willow Creek, some of these major stories of grandiose leaders - when that's severed, there can be a real kind of painful kind of reappraisal of what's... For the follower, there's a sense of, So now what do I do, I've been unplugged from my power source. Who am I without my power source? And there could be real despair. They're wounded, they're traumatized. And when I do work with folks like that, we have to get to the roots of their own trauma story. Like, first of all, what drew you to that person, what about your own story is implicated in that, why did it have such power in your life, such lasting power, and who are you really, apart from needing to plug into someone else? Who are you? And let's discover a deeper source of goodness, of hope, of love, of power in your life, in and through Jesus, as an image bearer rather than plugging in to the powerful abuser.

Mike Cosper: It's often assumed that abusive leaders have an eye for the weak and the vulnerable, and prey specifically on them, and there's definitely some truth to that. But it's also true that the charismatic abuser has an eye for talent and becomes highly skilled at bringing them into their orbit and doing just what's necessary to keep them there.

It means on the one hand, having a certain lavishness, particularly if it serves them too. So the media and communications team got to build shredder's lair to create their own content. But it also meant having an eye on their vulnerabilities, which every single person has, and playing to those vulnerabilities in order to keep them close.

Jesse and many others have referred to what they call dad stuff, and how Mark would position himself as a spiritual father for them. And if you have a father wound, if you have a hunger for a spiritual dad, you'll go a long way to get it filled.

25 MIN

Mark Driscoll: When you lead spiritually, part of it is you feel like a father and you feel about other people like they are the family that God has given you to take care of.

Mike Cospers: These clips are from a sermon preached in March 2006, called Power From Jesus.

These are excerpts that have been clipped out because he spoke about it in several different places in the sermon, and they're useful because they're very much in line with the way Jesse and many others that I've interviewed have described Mark's use of fatherly language, both in the way he related to the church and the way he related to individual leaders in the church.

Mark Driscoll: As a pastor, as a Christian leader, for those of you who have led in ministry, who do lead ministries at this church, you know that you end up doing a lot of fathering. It doesn't mean that ultimately you're the father, but you do a lot of fathering, a lot of things that a dad is supposed to do. And especially with a church like this, where a lot of people didn't have a dad or dad didn't do his job, a lot of what we do is actually parenting type work, fathering type work. For me, this rings so true because I feel like I have two families. I have my family at home with my five kids, and a lot of diapers and drama and trauma. And then at Mars Hill, I have five thousand diapers and additional issues to deal with.

And there are two families. And in addition, there is a burden that comes on a father that no one else feels. Dad sort of shoulders the load. And in the church, the lead pastor, the founding pastor shoulders the load.

Mike Cospers: Here's psychologist and spiritual abuse expert, Diane Langberg.

Diane Langberg: We all want a spiritual daddy. We have One, but we can't see him and He's not in the flesh right now. And so I think when the leader comes and tries to get them to stay and things like that, they feel like, Okay, maybe it will be better. And so they stay. Plus they're so worn down. You can't be abused for a long time and think straight. It's just not possible. It doesn't matter how smart you are. And they're weary, and they want a balm for their wounds. And so if the same person who's hurting them will give it to them, they'll take it.

Mike Cospers: We'll be right back.

Back at the turn of the century, at the same time that conversations about the emerging church and post-modernism are starting to gather steam, another movement is brewing. Its roots stretch in several different directions, and into a really strange mix of denominations and personalities. But in spite of their differences, they formed an Alliance and made a significant impact on evangelicalism in the two decades since.

To understand how it kicked off and got momentum, you should probably talk about some institutions, certainly some churches, and definitely some celebrities. But almost universally, when you talk to folks who study the movement, they agree: You have to start by talking about seashells.

[@DianeLangberg](#)

🐦 @JohnPiper

John Piper: I've got a little article here from Reader's Digest.

Mike Cospser: This is John Piper, speaking at Passion's one-day event in 2000. Moments before, he told the story of two women, Ruby and Laura, both in or near their 80s, who'd spent their lives devoted to serving others, and who died while serving as missionaries in Cameroon. Their death wasn't a tragedy, Piper was saying, because they'd given their lives away to something that mattered.

John Piper: This is a tragedy. Title of the article: Start Now, Retire Early. Bob and Penny took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30-foot trawler, play softball, and collect shells.

Mike Cospser: There's 40,000 people in this crowd that's gathered outside Memphis, and they're sitting on tarps and garbage bags, wearing raincoats, ponchos. It's maybe 70 degrees, but it's rainy and windy, just miserable to be out. And it's not an environment any preacher ever wants to have to show up in. But even going back, watching the video on YouTube, there's something kind of electric about it.

John Piper: That's a tragedy, that's a tragedy. And there are people in this country that are spending billions of dollars to get you to buy it. And I get 40 minutes to plead with you, Don't buy it. With all my heart I plead with you: Don't buy that dream, the American dream, a nice house, a nice car, a nice job, a nice family, a nice retirement collecting shells as the last chapter before you stand before the Creator of the universe to give an account with what you did. Here it is, Lord, my shell collection.

30 MIN

Well, not for Ruby and not for Laura. Don't waste your life. Don't waste it.

Collin Hansen: Every revival, when you look back on it historically, has this sort of spark moment, and it can be easily overplayed in the future, just for the sake of historical narratives. But if you're looking for that moment within the Young, Restless, Reformed, it would be John Piper's one day message, Don't Waste Your Life, in 2000. For people in my generation - so essentially older millennials into Gen X - it's one of those things where I don't know how many of us were actually there and how many more of us claimed that we were there, in retrospect, or just that we were there in spirit. It's like the Woodstock of Young, Restless, Reformed.

Mike Cospser: This is Collin Hansen. Collin is the Vice President for Content, and Editor in Chief of the Gospel Coalition. And in the mid 2000s, he wrote a book called Young, Restless, Reformed, about the new Calvinist movement that was taking off at the time. He, like many others, points to this moment in Memphis as a critical launching pad for the movement.

Collin Hansen: It's in an open field, it's tons of music, the weather is crazy and there's this wild-haired guy calling a generation to lay down their lives for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

Mike Cospser: As Hanson traces it out, the discovery of John Piper gave people a taste of

🐦 @collinhansen

reform theology that for many resonated on a different level than what they'd known in church before.

Collin Hansen: What I came to understand under the reading of Charles Taylor and other describers of our secular age, is that Christianity without much of a historical, theological, confessional orientation is very difficult to sustain within an immanent frame. So a transcendent religion that is connected biblically across the Old and New Testament, that is connected historically within a robust confessional tradition, that offers you a genuine alternative to the sort of therapeutic turn, I would say, the me-centered turn in American culture and including evangelical theology. Reformed theology gives you a really strong place to stand in response to all of that.

So if those are concerns that you grew up with - let's say that you grew up in a kind of theologically thin evangelical background - the reformed theology was a pretty appealing coming of age theology.

Mike Cosper: Collin's argument makes a lot of sense to me. If young people at the turn of the millennium were looking for a gateway into something that feels like transcendence, something they're out of touch with because of life in a disenchanted, secularized world, then reformed theology has an especially strong appeal.

It immerses them in a story about God's mysterious providence, and it gives them a sense of place in a larger narrative. And whatever one might think of reformed theology, there's no denying the fact that Piper has a way, particularly through his preaching, of presenting his listeners with a vision of a big, transcendent and awe-inspiring God.

The whole point of his Passion message is summed up in a line that he almost whispered: Don't waste your life. And that became the theme of his ministry in the years to come, inspiring countless to become pastors, church planters and missionaries. As Hansen frames it, then, Piper's sermon at Passion was a moment where reformed theology hit the mainstream, and it did so at a moment when other efforts had already laid groundwork to be able to support, sustain, and extend the interest.

So he points to Ligon Duncan, Reformed Theological Seminary, and Reformed University Fellowship in one stream. There's also Albert Mohler and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in another, a seminary that Mohler had essentially stripped to the studs and rebuilt over the past decade, after the conservative resurgence in the SBC.

There's also Driscoll and Mars Hill, and there's CJ Mahaney and Sovereign Grace Ministries. Mahaney is a self-described former druggie who came to faith in the charismatic revivals of the seventies. He co-planted what became Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland, with Larry Tomczak in 1977.

And then they launched a network of churches with another co-founder, Brent Detwiler, in 1982. They were originally called People of Destiny International, but in the 1990s, after they came to embrace reformed doctrine, they rebranded as Sovereign Grace. It bears mentioning that Sovereign Grace has faced a series of scandals, most of which were made public starting in 2009 with the departure of Detwiler. But as the new Calvinist

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movement was taking off in the decade prior, when Hansen was writing his book, most of this was out of view. Connected to Mahaney was one other figure, a celebrity in his own, right, whose commitment to reformed doctrine also helped popularize it.

Joshua Harris: I was convicted by his teaching about the local church, and ended up getting to know him and then moving across the country to be an intern in his church, live in his basement, learn from him. He said to me, You're a Timothy, you need a Paul in your life.

Mike Cospers: This is Joshua Harris. Harris is the author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, a book that became the go-to guide for dating and courtship among a certain tribe of conservative evangelicals, when it came out in 1997. His parents were significant figures in the homeschooling movement, and Harris had established a platform in that world, speaking and publishing a magazine called *New Attitude*. But his ambitions changed after he met Mahaney.

Joshua Harris: I just saw in him a model for what I wanted to be, and I was very excited about laying down my para-church goals and embracing the importance of the local church, and that redirected my entire life.

Mike Cospers: He started his internship at the church the same year his book released; that was 1997. In 2004, he became the lead pastor at Covenant Life, and he served in that role until 2015. He left in the fallout of the controversies mentioned earlier, initially pursuing a seminary education. Then in 2019, he shared that he no longer identifies as a Christian.

I wanted to talk to Harris though, because he's another young leader in this movement, someone who was in the room for much of what came later. And in ways not unlike Mark, he's a casualty of the Christian celebrity phenomenon.

Also, by his telling, he played an unwitting role in an introduction that would give birth to one of the movement's strange alliances.

Joshua Harris: So there's this joke, kind of a funny story that Mark Dever tells, that he met CJ because he was looking for a copy of, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, and they were driving by the church. He didn't know CJ, and he's like, Oh, let's stop in the church, that's where Josh works. And he found a copy of the book and walked by CJ's office and left a note. And that's how CJ and Mark Dever, who would then later go on to start together for the gospel and do all kinds of things, connected. So I love to give CJ a hard time that he owed his friendship to Mark, to me, which he vehemently denied, he'll deny until his dying breath, I'm sure.

Mike Cospers: In many ways, Mark Dever and CJ Mahaney couldn't be more different. Mahaney's ex-hippy, low church and lighthearted demeanor is a stark contrast to the Cambridge-educated pastor of a historic Baptist church on Capitol Hill. But they became fast friends, and that friendship birthed one of the significant landmarks of the new Calvinist movement.

Joshua Harris: I started running this conference that was the continuation of my events that I'd been doing called *New Attitude*, and the *New Attitude* conference was for young

adults and singles, college-age students. We went to Passion to learn from them. I remember meeting with Louie and basically saying, I want to do this too.

And so that was a place where...We actually started having that in Louisville, which was part of the way that CJ through Mark Dever connected with Al Mohler, and then Lig Duncan. And so I remember being at the New Attitude - one of our first, second or third New Attitude conferences - and CJ calling me at hotel late at night and talking about how he had been with those three guys, and they started brainstorming about this idea of doing their own event that was built around their friendships.

And so it's like seeing Together For the Gospel birthed in that context, there is just such a sense of energy. Evangelical just love movements, right? We just get so jazzed about these kinds of things.

Mike Cospser: Together for the gospel would launch in 2006 at the Galt House Hotel in Louisville. That first year was small, maybe 600 people, but as Hansen points out, the togetherness of that event is what made it so significant.

Collin Hansen: So you had two Southern Baptists, a charismatic non-denominational person, and then you also had a Presbyterian, PCA, who were leading this thing as friends and bringing in different speakers. And that was one of the first public demonstrations in 2006 in Louisville, at Together For the Gospel, of what was becoming this broader phenomenon that I would then dub Young, Restless, Reformed.

Mike Cospser: Other speakers would include John Piper, John MacArthur, and R.C. Sproul. And when you throw them all in the mix, you find a group of men who don't have consensus on baptism, the Lord's Supper, church governance, charismatic gifts, or whether or not someone can be an apostle today. And yet here they are sharing a stage.

It demonstrates how powerfully theological commitments on certain issues can build bridges. And while concerns from people like John MacArthur would mean that Driscoll would never be a part of Together For the Gospel, an alliance that formed at about the same time would welcome him in: The Gospel Coalition.

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Collin Hansen: I remember covering the first Gospel Coalition public meeting in 2007 for Christianity Today, I remember a clean-cut, fresh faced Mark Driscoll. Like I said, 2007, with his polo shirt, meekly standing in line, waiting with all these other people - there were maybe 500, 700 people at this conference - waiting to ask a question of these pastors - John Piper, Don Carson and Tim Keller. And we have pictures of that as well. And so Mark seemed around that time as the kind of person who was interested in learning, interested in growing. That didn't last very long.

Mike Cospser: This was about the same time that Hansen would profile Driscoll for Christianity Today in an article titled Pastor Provocateur. It's a pretty interesting read, given all that's unfolded since, because a lot of the concerns were already there. But like so many who encountered him at the time, it was easy to let the weight of his successes overwhelm the visible concerns.

Collin Hansen: I took a lot of criticism from people like John MacArthur for writing about Driscoll. The Gospel Coalition took a lot of criticism for including people like Driscoll. And it would be interesting to go back in retrospect and consider what were all of the different warning signs that we missed, that I missed, and I think that's pretty obvious in some ways.

Mike Cospers: Again, all this is happening around 2007. And meanwhile, within Mars Hill, Jesse Bryan and his team have been getting the communications apparatus built up and aligned so that the messaging, and frankly, the marketing of Driscoll is getting better and better.

The result is that Driscoll and Mars Hill have an entirely different reach and audience than anyone before, and he's consistently charting number one in religion for both his podcasts and his YouTube pages. As I see it, that creates a kind of double incentive for older leaders, like the ones at TGC, to wrap their arms around Mark. Here's Joshua Harris' take:

Joshua Harris: Oh, Mars Hill, and Mark Driscoll in particular, was a super hot topic. He was a rock star. It was like, there was so much momentum, there was so much excitement, and I think some confusion around, Whoa, how do we control this rocket fuel? Like, we want to help him, we also want to benefit from the rocket fuel, we also want to be careful that we don't endorse something that's not good.

I remember CJ was so kind of warning me away from identification with Driscoll. I was invited out to speak there and ended up doing that, but I went there and I spoke a message called Humble Orthodoxy, where I was definitely trying to add this voice of, Hey, we should also be compassionate and gracious, and so on.

So there was this there's this jockeying for influence and so on. And Driscoll was just so powerful, so he just sucked up the oxygen in any place that he went, but they were these older guys that were trying to behind the scenes influence and counsel, and try to protect this broader movement.

So there was definitely the sense of, We're all connected to something really important, and we need to be elder statesman and make sure that we're looking out for these younger guys. We can't just write them off, but we also don't want them to flame out, which many of us did.

Mike Cospers: For his part, Hansen pretty much echoes what Harris said. There was both an opportunity in someone like Mark, in what he could bring to the movement, and there was an opportunity for Mark in being surrounded by wiser, older, more seasoned leaders. For that to work though, Mark had to be entering those relationships in good faith, genuinely interested in learning from those leaders. That too was proven over time not to be the case.

Collin Hansen: I can't imagine that they would have thought that one, he didn't have any interest in actually learning from older leaders, but that second, he would see himself as being really the trendsetter for everybody else, that he was the person who had unlocked all of the secrets and that none of their wisdom was transferable to him.

And I would imagine that's why when he came to the Gospel Coalition meetings, he didn't actually participate in them, he would head off in James MacDonald's limousine to Cubs and White Sox games.

Mike Cospers: James MacDonald. If you're not familiar with the James MacDonald story, here's the quick hit. He planted Harvest Bible Chapel in the Chicago area in 1988, and it grew into a multi-site church with more than 13,000 in attendance by 2012. He also had a successful radio ministry, but he was plagued with controversy over allegations of abusive leadership and financial impropriety. Many of those allegations surfaced because of the work of investigative journalist, Julie Roys, as well as two bloggers, Ryan Mahoney and Scott Bryant, who published on a website called The Elephant's Debt.

There were lawsuits, libel claims, leaked audio recordings, really some wild stuff. Enough to fill another whole podcast. But long and short of it, in 2019, he was fired by Harvest. Back in the mid-2000s though, he was a member of the Gospel Coalition, and a little bit of an older statesman to someone like Mark. The two found a kinship in one another.

Collin Hansen: They were really similar in the sense that they both were exuding machismo as Driscoll started to... Well, as he spent more time with MacDonald, MacDonald started to dress really differently, started to dress much younger, much edgier, did different things with his facial hair, things like that. And so it seemed like they had a kind of mutually beneficial relationship. I think Mark was attracted to somebody who was a lot like him. He had a lot of money, he liked to have a lot of fun, he liked to poke fun at theological nerds. What he really obsessed about was the business side of church, and ultimately Driscoll found in MacDonald a kind of mentor for leading a mega church.

Mike Cospers: Here's Jesse Bryan again.

Jesse Bryan: The more that we went places - I remember we were at James's house and I know James did some [CENSORED] stuff, but he always made me laugh, which apparently is my Achilles heel - But like when he went to James' house, because we were going to Haiti to shoot this stuff that was gnarly, in hindsight... But went to James' house, and I remember walking in and he was like, Dude, this is sweet. Like James downstairs had like a woodworking thing and like a whole poker room and stuff. It was a gigantic house. And then we went to James' church and I remember being like, This is bonkers.

Were you there for that, Andy?

Oh, man. The church was so big. Dude, keep in mind, we're in Seattle. There is no big churches here. Like I remember when we went to Rick Warren's church being like, Is this the parking lot of the church? It was gigantic. So we went to Harvest, and we're used to these tiny little churches with screens in it, and we're walking around, getting lost inside, looking for the bathroom. That's how gigantic these places were. When Mark started seeing that, he was like, Oh, dang, it's like that?

Mike Cospers: Here's another way to think about it. When Driscoll comes into the Gospel Coalition, he's got everything to gain by associating himself with respectable names like Keller, Carson and Piper. And because - to use Harris's metaphor - he's like rocket fuel,

they're going to have a pretty high tolerance for his weaknesses, both because of his charisma and because he's young and they're counting on his presence in a community like this to help mature him.

Collin Hansen: If you start a church in your twenties or your early thirties, or you become the pastor of a church in your twenties or your early thirties, what you can know for sure is that you're not mature enough to do it, and you're not experienced enough to do it. You have to expect a higher degree of volatility in churches like that, or in movements like that.

Mike Cosper: The expectation then is that you take a volatile leader and immerse them in a community of more mature leaders, and you'll help form them into something more stable, you'll take the edge off that volatility. But here's where the problem extends well beyond Driscoll. What if we've reached a place where there's no incentive to being formed by communities? What if the volatility is part of the brand? What is the commitment on the part of someone like Driscoll is purely to leverage the opportunity to expand his platform, to broadcast his performance and his self-expression farther and wider.

Collin Hansen: When you look back, pretty much an entire generation of Gen X church planters didn't make it, especially if they were successful. So we can identify Mark and we can single Mark out and we can talk about Mark, but it seems to be this is a much bigger problem. It seems like this is a generational thing. And that's why I think there was something unique about the combination of youth culture at the time that was facilitated by the internet, and the spread of social media and podcasts and blogs and conferences that came with all of that, that coincided with a push to church planting. I think when you put that whole mix together, it was bound to explode.

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You could look at TGC, you could look at church planting, you could look at contextualization. You can say, Well, gosh, we should blame Tim Keller for Mark Driscoll. Well, the thing is though, they're from totally different generations and different experiences. And so Tim publishing books at age 58, he'd come through...like, his formative nine years of ministry experience were starting at a church in Hopewell, Virginia, the chemical capitol of the south, where he had only two people in the entire church who had graduated from college, and they were elementary school teachers.

That's his formative ministry experience, for nine years. Before he got that job, which was a three-month trial test, he and Kathy had taken the US Civil Service exam to become postal workers. That's a different world. So you can say, Well see, Tim had started this ministry that included Mark, and it was all about church planting in major cities, and see that's what he produced... Well, Tim Keller didn't have to grow up with the internet.

Mike Cosper: I think it's pretty clear that Mark's investment in a place like TGC was really about helping him with the credibility he needed for the next level of influence he was after. And whenever issues came up in his life or in his ministry or his relationships, when people would push back at him and encourage him to submit to some older leaders around him, he wasn't shy about telling people why he didn't feel like he could submit to any of those men. I've heard it from multiple people that I interviewed.

Collin Hansen: I can't learn anything from a pastor whose church is smaller than 10,000 people.

Mike Cospers: When he parted ways with Rick McKinley several years before, he said essentially the same thing.

Rick McKinley: Our last real communication between Mark and I, I said, Man, my hope for you is that you would find somebody to submit to. I said, I don't care if it's Piper or somebody, but you need to find somebody to submit to.

And he said, I can't submit to Piper because my church is bigger than his. And I thought, We're....I don't know where that kind of thinking comes from.

Mike Cospers: I mentioned these stories to Jesse Bryan and he had a different take on them.

Jesse Bryan: And you know what, he was right. They weren't ruthless enough, and they weren't savvy enough. They were too worried about being a thing called pastoral, to build something at that scale. There's a guy named Simon Sinek that says scale creates distance. Those people you're talking about couldn't build a movement like that because they didn't want to be distant. Mark had no problem with distance. And I get that too. Why would you? You're surrounded by a bunch of people telling you to slow down and all you think they're doing is getting in the way. He just didn't realize they were saying it because they actually cared about him

Mike Cospers: With someone like Mark, the combination of their charisma and certainty has a way of keeping you in their orbit for a long, long time, and often - not always, but often - you wake up to realize you've been used right about the time they've decided they don't need you anymore.

It's tempting to Monday morning quarterback these stories, to think, If I'd been there, I would have done something different. It's like that meme that goes around where there's a crowd of Germans in a shipyard giving the Nazi salute, and one guy slightly turned away, refuses. The caption usually says something like, When the time comes, be this guy. His name was August Landmesser, and the mother of his children was Jewish. She would end up being killed in a prison camp and he would get drafted into the war only to go missing in action later. We'd all like to think we're that guy, that we'd be immune to the excitement of the crowd, the aura of charisma, the sense of movement that mobilizes masses of people. But there's a reason he's alone in that picture. You have to know there's something wrong. You have to know there's something wrong when your senses and the voices around you and everything life's already taught you about where to put your faith and trust is pushing the other way.

I hope that in telling this story, we can cultivate a better moral imagination. That we might be able to ask better questions about the excitement of crowds, the glow of celebrity, the momentum of a movement. I hope it might give us the backbone to be an August Landmesser, but I also hope it gives us the fear and trembling necessary to know we might not be. Because when we're caught up in it, the shock that comes with

waking up can be devastating.

Jesse Bryan: Oh dude, Aqua Fantasy. When we were in Turkey, this was the second trip.

Andy Maier: 115 degrees

Jesse Bryan: Was it really? So we were in Turkey, and keep in mind, this team was, like, killing themselves for Mark. We were shooting all day and lugging these giant cameras and sticks up and down these mountains, it was gnarly. And I kid you not, we get in the bus and we're, like, half dead. We get in the bus and we're with Mark, and he's like, Oh... And we pull into this place called Aqua Fantasy, and it's like this resort. And we're like, Dude. And it has a private beach and you can rent, like, a...

Andy Maier: That was for us.

Jesse Bryan: That's what I'm saying. So it was like a private beach, there's gates and you go in and there's like little gazebos and everybody gets a golf cart and it's this insane resort.

Andy Maier: Your own Waterslide.

Jesse Bryan: Yeah. Literally everybody had like a mini pool behind their gazebos and stuff. And we're like, Dude, we've never been to a place like this, this is gonna be awesome. And he's like, alright, guys, I get off here. He gets off off with his family, the bus pulls out, we go into downtown and we stay at a Fleabag motel. There was so much mold. I had such bad allergies they had to keep switching rooms because I couldn't stop sneezing. And so then we would have to stay up all night long, dumping footage and cutting footage. And then meanwhile, he'd show up to set after being at Aqua Fantasy. And here's the worst part about it. He didn't do his homework. So then he'd show up to set and he'd be like, Alright, Jesse, what we got. And I'd be like, Dude, what do you mean? Okay, so this library was established at this period, there's a tunnel from the library to the brothel. Let me show you this thing at the bathroom. So there's these sticks that they used... And it was like, it was wild. It was wild. And what's crazy is Nate Burke, while we were there, when he read the letter to Ephesus, Nate was there and I was standing... Do you remember? I was standing in the back. You might've been with me when Nate came up to me. I was in the middle by that, like, tomb. I was standing in the back. I think you were here. Nate walks up to me. He just read the letter to the Ephesians. He's standing on the steps, the sun's going down. It's beautiful. And then Nate looks at me and goes, That letter's about us, you have abandoned your first love. He said, That letter's about us. And I was like, Oh, dang. Because Nate doesn't miss any of that kind of stuff. Yeah. That was gnarly. And you're watching the sun go down while he preaches and he's like, Dang, he's preaching about us, we've abandoned our first love, it's not about Jesus, it's all about Mark. And that was a wrap.

Mike Cosper: Keep an eye out for a bonus episode in a couple of weeks where we'll talk more with Joshua Harris about the perils of youth in Christian celebrity, and the process of deconstruction. In many ways, it's a parallel to the Mars Hill story and a familiar one to many who felt like the ground came out from under their feet when Mars Hill closed its doors.

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