

State of Emergency

The urgency of the mission can make it tempting to change or suspend the rules, but doing so always paves the way for abuse of leadership.

SHOW NOTES

Church planting isn't for the faint of heart. It requires a tenacity few pastors can fully anticipate when they set out. Healthy planting demands not only clarity of mission and relentless work, but practical partnership, wise counsel, and responsive governance to the changing needs that come with growth. From the church's beginning, Mars Hill leadership committed to all of these—a vision of Jesus as senior pastor with elders serving with “one vote each.” But somewhere along the line, the vision shifted. Absolutism and a muscular, aggressive form of governance took hold, a campaign led by Mark Driscoll in the name of church growth.

In this episode of *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, host Mike Cospers pulls back the curtain to expose the inner workings of church governance at Mars Hill. Guided by careful research and hundreds of hours of interviews, Cospers plots out a story of church growth corrupted by power. Discover a Mark Driscoll you may never have met—a young church planter with a vision for Seattle and for the world. Watch what happens when the friction between accountability and speed causes church planting efforts to combust. And see how prioritizing “reaching people for Jesus” can mask spiritual abuse without the proper checks and balances.

MASTHEAD

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

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Mike Cospers: It's Sunday, September 30th, 2007, and it's an evening service at Mars Hill Church. Mark Driscoll is preparing to preach the final sermon in a series on the book of Nehemiah.

Mark Driscoll: I'm gonna go ahead and pray. Tonight is a great text. A guy beats up some members of his church, scalps one. It really.... Heartwarming is really what comes to mind.

Mike Cospers: The subtitle of the series was Building a City Within the City, and they'd been in the book since February, almost eight months. The congregation was meant to take the whole thing as a spiritual metaphor for what Mars Hill was going to look like in Seattle. And the way Driscoll portrayed it throughout the series is that he was cast in the role of Nehemiah, sent by God to the city to bring about reform and restoration.

In the final verses of the book, the prophet rebukes the men of Jerusalem for intermarrying with foreign wives, especially the priests. He punishes them, drives a bunch of them out, and the story ends with Nehemiah asking God to be remembered for making the priesthood pure again. So in casting himself as Nehemiah in these sermons, it's easy for Driscoll to begin to air some of his own frustrations about the work of Mars Hill.

Mark Driscoll: Then I confronted them and I cursed them. He's just cussing guys out. And beat some of them. I'll read that again. And beat some of them. Now he's an older guy and he's beating up members of his church. What do we do with that? I'll tell you what I like to do with that. I'd like to follow in his example. There's a few guys right now that if I wasn't gonna end up on CNN, I would go Old Testament on them, even in leadership in this church.

Mike Cospers: If you've been immersed in Driscoll's world for awhile, even if you've just been immersed in this podcast, then these comments are just one more example of Mark presenting himself as a brawler at heart. One more example of a violent ethos that he wanted to project. Even so, there's something unsettling to me in the laughter. It's hard to imagine it in any other church context, a pastor who's verbally intimidating his own staff and elders from the pulpit, which is what this is to be sure. And it getting laughs and applause from the pews. By the end of the sermon, though, when he returns to the theme, there isn't laughter and he isn't joking.

Mark Driscoll: Some men need to be confronted. Some men need to be rebuked. Some men need to be dealt with because of that stubborn, obstinate, stiff-necked attitude that I'm a man and I'm the highest authority and I do whatever I want. And so they need to be dealt with in a very strong manner. He fires some spiritual leaders, certain guys lose jobs. You're not a pastor here anymore. You're out of work.

Mike Cospers: Two of the pastors in that room during that sermon were Paul Petry and Bent Myer. Both had been longtime members and leaders there, Paul, since 2001, and Bent since before even that, and both were on staff. In days before this, they along with the other pastors had been asked to review new bylaws for the church that represented significant changes in the way the church was governed. Paul was also an attorney and had some concerns. So after talking about them with Bent and with the church's legal counsel, had submitted those concerns along with suggested changes the previous

Friday, as all of the elders had been asked to do. That afternoon, he and Bent received an email from Jamie Munson, which asked them to come to an impromptu meeting after that evening service, at 8:15. Here's Paul Petry.

Paul Petry: I thought it was going to be just Jamie, but it ended up being Jamie and Mark, and Bubba Jennings and Scott Thomas.

Mike Cospser: What he'd anticipated was a conversation about the bylaws and about his proposed changes. But as you can imagine, you walk into a room like that, outnumbered, with three of the executive elders and a campus pastor waiting for you, and the temperature changes immediately.

Paul Petry: And that is the meeting where Bent Meyer and I were fired on the spot, after Mark gave his Nehemiah sermon on beating up his pastors. Little did we realize we were those couple of guys.

Mike Cospser: From Christianity Today, this is Mike Cospser 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 on the podcast, Episode Seven, State of Emergency.

There are almost as many models for church governance as there are churches, denominational hierarchies, pastor as apostolic CEO, congregational models where members vote on almost everything. You could go on and on, and you could debate the merits of different models all day to. A good governance model can protect a church from a bad leader, and a bad one can protect a bad leader from a church trying to hold them accountable.

Church leaders who organize these systems are often trying to walk a tightrope. On the one hand, they want a structure flexible enough that they can make budget decisions and hires as needed to respond to rising concerns in the church. On the other hand, there's a need for oversight and checks and balances, and those require a lot more time because other people have to understand the rationale for a decision and give consent. It slows things down.

And that tension between accountability and speed is at the heart of some of Mars Hill's deepest conflicts.

Paul Petry: Most churches, you always had this sort of senior pastor, and for lack of a better term, almost a Moses model, if you will. We had one guy and he was calling all the shots and Mars Hill, at the time, was very different.

Mike Cospser: This is Paul Petry again. He's describing the era around 2001, when he arrived at the church.

Paul Petry: Mark would always say, all of the elders here have one vote. And at that time

there were not that many elders. Let's see, there was Lief Moi, there was Mike Gunn, there was Bent Meyer. And Mark made it very clear from the pulpit that everybody here is equal in authority, so if they wanted to get rid of me, they could. I'd never heard a pastor actually say that, and so even though he was sort of brash, if you will, he had these guys around him that could hold him accountable, and so we felt safe.

Mike Cospers: That sense of safety mattered to quite a few people. As compelling as Driscoll might've been, you couldn't help but get the sense that a 30-ish firebrand probably didn't need to be left entirely to his own devices, running a church. And by all accounts, the elders around him in those early years locked horns with him regularly. For Paul and others, it was just a matter of common sense. You'd want the church to be led by a consensus of a number of leaders. Besides that, there was also the fact that no one thought of Driscoll as some kind of lone gunman church planter. If you'd come to the church, anytime before 2006, you'd have known that Mike Gunn and Lief Moi weren't just elders, they were co-founders. Mike Gunn was in campus ministry at the University of Washington, and was involved with Driscoll in college ministry at Antioch Bible Church starting in 1994. Lief Moi was the host of a syndicated radio show called Street Talk, and Driscoll would regularly appear on air.

Lief Moi: Okay, Matt, Seattle, Washington. How you doing, Matt?

Matt: All right.

Lief Moi: What's on your mind?

Matt: Why are you pro-life?

Lief Moi: You asked me this question once before, Matt.

Mark Driscoll: Why does it matter? What value is there in human life?

Matt: You don't think there's any value in human life?

Lief Moi: He's asking you. Why do you care?

Mark Driscoll: I do because there is a God, but why do you care? I think we were created in the image and likeness of God, and that's where they have value.

Mike Cospers: For many years, the story of God calling Mark and telling him to marry Grace, preach the Bible and train men included him asking Mike and Leif to join him.

Mark Driscoll: So I found two guys that I could really trust and admire. They were like Priscilla and Aquila, great marriages, their wives were good teachers. It was Leif Moi who is one of the pastors here with his wife, Tanya. And Mike Gunn who has since went off with his wife, Donna, to plant a church. And I sat the two of them down. I said, we're going to plant a church, are you with us? And they said, Yes. We just tripled, the church exploded. Bang. We're at six, this is amazing.

Mike Cospers: A significant part of Mars Hill's early ministry took place in an old theater in Seattle's university district. It was called The Paradox. The church met there and they hosted all ages concerts there at a time when the city of Seattle made hosting concerts like that really difficult. That work at The Paradox helped put Mars Hill on the map, but it was Moi who actually owned the building and allowed Mars Hill to use it. In those early days, there was genuine shared leadership between the three of them. Here's how Driscoll described it in 2001.

Mark Driscoll: There's a perception within Protestantism that the pulpit is the most important thing that happens in the church, so whoever's in the pulpit is the most important person. Okay. And that's something that needs to be re-hardwired, that there's worship that's gathered, but the most important thing is worship that's scattered, where the people go out and be missionaries during the week. That's the most important thing, because without that, we have nothing to get back together to celebrate. And so I think you can fight that on a number of levels. I think one of them is removing the concept of the senior pastor and removing that word. I think part of it is attempting, in as much as is possible, to empower other preachers and communicators to throw and to split teaching. And if they're not great with the pulpit, then creating other avenues where they're seen in positions of leadership and authority. If you guys go to the Bible study night, I don't teach it. Mike Gunn teaches it. He's a better interactive teacher than I am. I'm a better monologue, he's a better dialogue. So when we do the big outdoor Bible study, he does it, I don't.

 @bryanzug

Bryan Zug: There's a thing where Mark is perceived as this monolithic person who doesn't share the pulpit. I remember times there were guest pastors.

Mike Cospers: This is Bryan Zug. He was a member at Mars Hill from 2000 to about 2013.

Bryan Zug: I know a person Mark offered a position to, to come be co-preaching pastor at Mars Hill in the early days.


Mike Cospers: In church planting, you're always throwing spaghetti at the wall, hoping something sticks. Mars Hill was no exception to this, and ideas like running a music venue, which is a real headache as well as an opportunity, or the online chat board, or film nights, or experiments with who might lead in the pulpit were all part of the recipe. Driscoll too, was testing out his own sense of his skills as a leader.

Bryan Zug: His thing was...like, if he was anything, he was the standup comic guy. That was his exploration in making art, right, was experimenting in the pulpit with those sorts of things and taking that risk. Because at the time, it was not clear that any of this would pan out. When you look back at Mars Hill, sometimes you're like, Oh, it's just obvious. No, there were times when, like, the first year I was there in 2000, they didn't know if they were going to get over 200 people and whether this was going to be sustainable, and they were going to shut the doors. It was all an experiment.

Mike Cospers: This gets at something we've said before, but it bears repeating. There's much about Driscoll that might've been baked in from the beginning, like his understanding of gender or his hunger to win every conflict. But if there was some master

plan to build Mars Hill into a megachurch, I'm yet to find anyone who knew about it. There were certainly people who thought it was possible. People who met Mark and saw his charisma and instincts. But for the most part, especially inside the church, no one had a sense that it was coming. When things began to take off and Driscoll started taking center stage more, there was actually a sense of loss.

Bryan Zug: Just a few years later, there was an Acts 29 pastors regional gathering at Mars Hill Ballard, in the lobby of the big building, and in the Q&A at the end, somebody says, Hey, we have three pastors and we work on sharing the pulpit and how do you think about that with Mars Hill? And he said, I don't share the bulk, but I'm basically the only person that can carry this off.

 @WendyAlsup

Wendy Alsup: Mark got it in his head that everybody was gravitating toward his services.

Mike Cospers: This is Wendy Alsup.

Wendy Alsup: And Mark was the best speaker of the three. So that was really when the philosophy of the church started changing, and it started slowly becoming the thing they hated, which was an American evangelical megachurch. The sense was that Mark drew the most people and had a sense that it was on his back to sustain that level of growth. I think in the end that's what it was. Mark wanted to sustain that level of growth and thought he was the only one capable of doing it.

Mike Cospers: Mike Gunn had spun Mars Hill's south campus into an independent church by then, called Harambee. But as of 2006, Lief Moi was still on staff and Driscoll still spoke of him not only as a co-founder of the church, but as his pastor.

Mark Driscoll: The elders and the pastors here are a team, mutually submissive. I've got my own pastor on staff, Pastor Lief, my wife and I submit to him, I have accountability with him. I'm one guy who votes with the other guys. This is not a dictatorship. The senior pastor is Jesus. We're a functional working, healthy, mutually submissive team. So I'm not saying I'm the spiritual leader, you do what I say. I think that's very abusive when one person alone is the spiritual leader.

15 MIN

Mike Cospers: When it was first established, Mars Hill's governance model was what's often referred to as elder led or elder ruled. This meant that all of the ultimate responsibility for the church was vested in the elders or pastors. In this model, those words are usually used interchangeably. They determine the policy, budgets, doctrinal statements, ministry philosophy, you name it. Mars Hill wasn't tied to a denomination, of course, so there was no external authority beyond the church. It boiled down, as Mark said, to one elder, one vote. And that model is fairly common among reform-minded, Baptist churches. John MacArthur advocates for it, as does Wayne Grudem, Alexander Strauch and Gene Getz. And if you were church planting in the early 2000s, one of the most vocal advocates for this model was actually Mark Driscoll. For instance, here he is offering a criticism of the pastor as CEO.

Mark Driscoll: He has to know everything, he has to govern everything. He has to be a generalist who could tell everybody everything. That's a really tough deal. Very tough

deal. Now, can the church grow if it has a senior pastor that is idolized? Well, sure. If your goal is church growth and not church health, one way to do it is get a really charismatic, dynamic personality that attracts a large number of people and let him do whatever he wants. And then he'll never leave. And the people will say, I go to so-and-so's church. So-and-so is my pastor, have you ever met him? No, I never met him. Never met him. He's my pastor. He changed my life, that one day I shook his hand, never been the same since.

Mike Cospers: For most of Mars Hill's, ministry years, they implemented this vision. Driscoll would often say that Jesus was actually the senior pastor, he was the teaching pastor, and Jamie Munson, who in other contexts would have been called the executive pastor, was actually the lead pastor of the church. Mark was one elder with one vote, and the other elders could fire him at any time. There's an obvious irony in the clip though, because a few years later they'd be a multi-site church with Mark preaching on video screens. Not only would members be in a different building than him, some would be in a different state. But as they'd frame it then, the video preaching was just one aspect of ministry that was surrounded by local ministry of pastors in each congregation. The degree to which that was a reality is visible in the fact that budgets over time became concentrated on the central ministries. But let's leave that rabbit trail aside because there's something else going on in Mark's teaching in these sessions that I think reflects a broader experience at Mars Hill. You can hear it in the critique from a moment ago, or from this one where he talks about Rick Warren's Purpose-Driven Church model.

Mark Driscoll: I should repent in advance because I'm going to enjoy this. Purpose-Driven model, concentric circles. You got a core, around them you got a congregation, you got a crowd of people that may or may not have levels of connectivity with the church, and you have the general community which surrounds your church. Your goal is to move them in so that they run around the bases and get to the point where they can be in the core. I'm not exaggerating. Potential idolatry is that we worship the community, and that really our goal is to get people to be the core. What else is missing? God. I have written it just as it appears. So there's no God. Now what happens to people once they become core, what is the potential attitude? I am very important, I slid into home. I'm very important. Why? Because I'm core. How about there's no real interface with culture, there's no view of leadership. This is a multi-level marketing strategy. This is a modified Amway.

Mike Cospers: There's a total of nearly six hours of these lectures, which were for Acts 29 pastors in the early 2000s. He weaves together contemporary scholarship on missions and culture with reflections on postmodernism, historical theology, and his own observations from planting Mars Hill. He continually brings his arguments back to scripture too, making the case that what he's arrived at is the biblical way to go. There's swagger and chest thumping and arrogance to it all for sure, but there's also a display of the intelligence that made so many leaders gather around him in the years to come, both inside Mars Hill and outside in networks of pastors like Acts 29 and the Gospel Coalition. That tone's really important to the big picture. It's not just that he's got convictions and thinks he's right, it's also that everyone else is so wrong. So if you bought into his vision, you felt like you were in on a secret, like the rest of the church was fumbling around in the dark while Driscoll had flipped the lights on. These lectures focus on big picture ministry philosophy, but that attitude pervaded the whole ministry of the church. So when you pay attention to ministry philosophy, you see that preaching is boring, so we learn from stand-up comics. Sunday

school and small groups don't work, so we do community groups. Recovery programs don't understand the gospel, so we do Redemption Groups. Christian counseling focuses too much on secular psychology, so we do biblical counseling.

Music is a pretty stark example of this too. For much of Mars Hill's history, there was such a distaste for Christian music, they only played original songs and hymns. It fostered a tremendous amount of creativity, but as several worship leaders from the church told me, it also fostered an arrogance that left them disconnected from other churches.

There are many other places where this attitude pervaded: children's ministry, marriage and family, women's ministry, publishing and conferences. Mars Hill even developed their own unaccredited graduate level training programs for pastors under the monicker Re:Train.

Here's how Jen Smidt describes the prevailing spirit of it all.



Jen Smidt: There was so much overt and subtle messages of that we were doing things right. Mark had a way of communicating the gospel, we had a way of creating community groups, we had music that was the best, we loved people so well. Like we had this magic, I dunno, this special sauce, this magic powder that worked. And so we were certain that we were doing things well or right, because we were growing and people were coming to Jesus, and God was blessing things.

Mike Cospers: That sense of movement is captured in an overt way in a sermon from 2011. Driscoll is preaching from Luke chapter 14, where Jesus tells the disciples to count the cost of following him, that they must be ready to give up everything. He drives the point home by asking the church what they're giving their lives away to.

Mark Driscoll: You're going to die. I'm gonna die. We're gonna die. I'm not looking to die, but if it comes, I want it to count. I want your life to count. I want your death to count. I want your legacy to matter. And what I love about Jesus' words is that they're brutally honest. It seems unconscionable, or perhaps just miraculous, that this man with this message would gather billions of people. And that's what he's done. And this, I believe prophetic word, comes to us from the Bible, from Jesus, and he is saying to continue. To not quit, but to continue. And He gives us this word today at the best point in the history of our church.

Mike Cospers: There's something here worth pausing on. It's the way that Driscoll is centering on something like existential angst. We're going to die, so let's live a life that counts. While there's nothing inherently wrong with that message, and in fact there's reason to talk about it because of the passage, there's a subtle turn he makes here at the end, when he makes it about the church.

Mark Driscoll: 15 years ago, a little Bible study met at my house. It's now called Mars Hill. You know what? We're not behind on budget. We beat budget. We didn't shrink last year, we grew. We didn't have less community groups, Redemption Groups, baptisms, weddings, children, we had more. Every single campus is growing. There is unity across the entire leadership; it's actually fantastic. The annual report that is now available or

online, you can read it; it's unbelievable. It's just a miracle after a miracle after a miracle.

Mike Cospers: The shift that's taken place is that the call to discipleship, where Jesus invites us to count the cost of following Him, gets relocated as a call to investment in Mars Hill Church.

Mark Driscoll: And what could kill us at this point, this window of opportunity, most of you don't know it because this is the only church you've ever really known. But we have a window of opportunity that God has opened up for us to see the kind of grace that one day they write a book about. They write a book about showing how Jesus showed up at an unlikely place among an unlikely people and did an unlikely thing, and that we got to be a part of it. This is it for me.

Mike Cospers: The cost of discipleship, as Jesus lays out in Luke 14, is the potential of rejection from friends and family, and a willingness to take up your cross. The promise on the other side of that loss is eternal life. Here though, in Driscoll's sermon, the reward is to be part of Mars Hill, part of a movement people will write books about. And the costs are the pragmatic costs of participation in church membership.

25 MIN

Mark Driscoll: If you have disciples and if you have non-Christians, everything will be fine, but what kills it are all the Christian consumers, all the people who don't go to community group, don't serve, don't give, don't become members because the bar is set too high. We intentionally set the bar high. You want to be a member of this church, you got to read a huge book with a thousand footnotes. So you say, I'm not gonna read that book, then you're not gonna be a good church member. If all it takes is footnotes to scare you away, you're not ready for war. You want to get married, you're going to have to go through a premarital process, declare all your sexual sin and history, submit to spiritual authority, and someone may tell you no. And you have to be okay with that.

Mike Cospers: To put it all together, then, you can see that the messaging creates a sense of urgency around the listener because you're going to die and you'd better make life matter. Driscoll's reaching to the heart where everyone longs for a sense of purpose. The promise that emerges is that you can find purpose at Mars Hill, where miracle after miracle is taking place, and the numbers in the annual report become a kind of objective evidence. How can you argue with them? The call to action then, is to join the movement, get committed, start serving, start giving, take on the responsibilities of becoming a member. Read the book with a thousand footnotes, and embrace the church's authority in your life, including an approach to premarital counseling that involves confessing the intimate details of your past, not just with your future spouse, but with a mentoring couple, and then submitting to the idea that they could tell you not to marry.

We are hearing all of this lifted a bit out of context, but the call to action comes not only at the end of a much longer sermon, but in the midst of this community's whole life where people have witnessed transformation, deep friendships, and all manner of learning and growth. The result is an enmeshed perspective on the work of God and the work of the church. Not the capital C church as in the global or historical church, but this particular local church. By transmutating the call to follow Jesus as a call to the duties of membership at Mars Hill, Driscoll is borrowing capital from the scriptures to call people

🐦 @BillHybels5

to give, serve, and submit to authority at his church. And on one level, that's a perfectly normal thing for pastors to ask of their church members. But there's an absolutism that comes with it in this context too, that ethos that communicates that Mars Hill has gotten so many things right that everyone else is getting wrong. Driscoll is hardly the only one to employ this kind of rhetoric in calling people to commit to the church. You heard a similar comment from Bill Hybels on Episode Two of this podcast.

Bill Hybels: Willow has to reach its full potential because it's the hope of the world.

Mike Cospers: Grandiosity is a feature of this kind of church. Hybels calls Willow Creek the hope of the world, Driscoll says people will write books about Mars Hill. There's an almost utopian sense of what the church might be capable of, an eschatological promise that God's going to fulfill his purposes for the city or for the world through this church, these people, these leaders. The weight of the potential outcome, that utopian vision of a transformed city or a revived generation, creates tremendous momentum, and you can easily get caught up in that momentum and find a sense of purpose and fulfillment. For many at Mars Hill, that was their story. But as Paul Petry and Bent Meyer found out one Sunday night in September, 2007, that momentum can be a curse too, because if you're in it's way, it's going to run you down.

We'll be right back.

Let's talk about totalitarianism for a minute. If you look at the history of totalitarian movements, or more generally, even dictatorships, there's a common and necessary catalyst for a leader to seize power. It's the ability to declare a state of emergency. Almost any government that isn't an absolute monarchy is going to have some kind of checks and balances on one person's authority, some separation of powers. But when you declare a state of emergency, you have a reason to concentrate authority inside a smaller and smaller circle, or even in just one individual, to guide the nation until the time of emergency has passed. You can suspend certain rights, delay due processes, and otherwise justify any expression of power necessary to answer the crisis of the moment.

The most famous example of this is the Reichstag Fire Decree in Germany from February, 1933. But similar events took place in fascist Italy, Soviet Russia, even going all the way back to ancient Rome. The point isn't the particulars of any one of these ideologies, let me be clear about that, but it's to look at the mechanics of power. If you can convince people that there's an emergency looming over them, and that you're the one to answer the call to fix it, history shows that people are quite ready and willing to hand power over to you.

30 MIN

Mark Driscoll: Only a hundred churches in America got over 6,000, 10,000, only about 40 churches in America get over 10,000. And what I say is that at each point there are ceilings of complexity and if you're unwilling or unable to navigate those complex stages, the church doesn't grow. And you say, Why is that a problem? The problem is not to grow the church, the problem is if people stop meeting Jesus because the systems, the policies, procedures, the services, the leadership structure says no more people can get saved, no more people can worship Jesus, no more people can grow.

Mike Cospers: This is from an Acts 29 training event in February, 2008, and it's a perfect

illustration of creating that sense of emergency. The assumption, which is totally unchallenged here, is that uninhibited growth is the key for people to meet Jesus. A church that reaches a growth ceiling is, in this frame, telling people that no one else can meet Jesus or grow in their faith. The point is not that

Mark Driscoll: The point is not that you want to grow a church, the point is that you want people to meet Jesus. The pain point in all growth comes on the senior leader. It all comes on the senior leader because everyone has spoken in unspoken expectations, and when they are not met, some will feel hurt, some will feel betrayed, some will feel disappointed, some will feel displaced. Some will leave quietly, some will declare war, some will declare that you are in sin. Some will accuse you of being arrogant and proud. Some will accuse you of having sold out and changed. And in those moments, you will pay a high toll emotionally to change. It will cost you personally.

Mike Cospser: This lecture was recorded a few months after that Nehemiah sermon, a few months after the firing of Paul Petry and Bent Meyer, and the tremendous fallout that came in the aftermath. What led up to those events though, is precisely the spirit you heard moments ago, the urgency of mission and a win at all costs approach to growth. To understand the buildup to that conflict, you actually have to go all the way back to 2004.

Paul Petry: So we had an elders meeting in the green room, and Mark was out of town, but Jamie came in with a stack of documents.

Mike Cospser: That's Jamie Munson, the executive pastor.

Paul Petry: And so we're all sitting around, it was an impromptu elders meeting, and Jamie handed out these documents and he said - and I'm paraphrasing, I'm not saying exactly what he said, this is just how I remember it. He said, Now Mark is out of town so he can't be here, but he wanted you guys to look through the new bylaws that we're proposing, and it would be really great if we could just vote on them and get it done so that when he comes back, he doesn't have to deal with it. Like, Yeah, let's do this for Mark. And so me being a lawyer, bylaws are like a big deal, right? I remember when John Piper's church changed their bylaws, I think they wrassled with them for six years before they came up with a new set of bylaws. So here we were being asked to basically read a rather thick document, and vote on it right there on the spot. I immediately made a motion that we table this thing for at least 30 days so we have a chance to review them and comment or whatever. Well, that went over like a lead balloon.

Mike Cospser: Another elder seconded the motion, requiring 30 days for the bylaws to get reviewed, and Petry found himself an object of no small amount of frustration from the other elders who didn't want to be tied up with these debates. That included Mark Driscoll.

Paul Petry: Well anyway, when Mark came back, he was not a happy camper, but he also was not, how should I say... He wasn't abusive.

Mike Cospser: In the days that followed, there were lots of late nights in a nearby pub, lots of emails back and forth as Paul, Mark and Jamie worked to come to something they could agree on.

Paul Petry: Mark and I really argued about it, and we fought a lot over what the final wording was going to be, but eventually it got voted on and that became the elders...or the bylaws of Mars Hill.

Mike Cosper: The basic idea of the new bylaws was pretty simple. There was a shared desire to be able to continually add new elders to the team, but as the church got bigger, it became more and more difficult to keep all of the elders informed about the ins and outs of the church's operations. To use examples Petry gave me, you'd want the whole body of elders to agree on spending \$50,000 on a sound system, but you didn't want them to have to vote on a hundred dollars worth of office supplies. So the new bylaws allowed for a group of executive elders who would oversee the operations of the church and would have a greater degree of flexibility regarding budgets and hiring. Petry admits that he didn't get everything he wanted in those bylaws, but as a compromise document, he was pretty happy with it.

Paul Petry: And I saw Jamie and he came into my office and I said, I know we've had some words over this and we've argued over it, but I just wanted to say that I don't feel any offense and I think we really came up with something that is going to be good for the church for years to come. And he looked at me and he said, It's not over.

Mike Cosper: It would be another three years until the discussion was picked back up and Jamie Munson would propose another set of amendments to the bylaws. That was September, 2007. Essentially, these amendments would take the changes of 2004 a step further. It would vest all the governing authority of the church in a board of directors made up of the executive team: Driscoll Munson, and a handful of other top staff members, plus an elected group of elders out of the larger body. The result though would be that by passing these bylaws, the elders would be signing away all governing authority of the church to this new body. This time around, they were given several weeks to review the documents and submit comments, which Paul did, as well as Bent Meyer, another elder. They had also called the church's legal council and asked some questions about the changes, and he in turn had called the executive pastor and filled him in. Come Friday night, September 28th, Paul and Bent submitted their proposed changes to Jamie Munson.

Paul Petry: To be honest with you, at the time I didn't really think I was taking any kind of a stand. I just figured, Hey, you asked my opinion and I'm going to do the best job I can for what I think is a good legal document, and I know that in any kind of contract negotiations or whatever, there's going to be compromises and things like that. I never saw myself as this contrarian or that I was taking a stand against something. I just figured, man, that's my job, and I was going to do the best job I could.

Mike Cosper: What they didn't know was that they'd kicked up a firestorm and that a whole lot of anger was headed their way. Scott Thomas was the executive director of Acts 29, and one of the executive elders at Mars Hill. He'd been part of the discussions since that Friday, when the comments were turned in.

Scott Thomas: He said, Call Paul and Bent into a meeting. And we had a meeting up in Mark's office and it was in between services, and I thought we were going to have a discussion. Instead, he basically fired - not basically - he fired both of them, using exple-

tives, on the moment, and then said, Alright, you can leave quietly or we'll do an investigation. And they said, We want an investigation.

Mike Cospser: This is where the story starts to get particularly messy. Paul and Bent were both employees, and technically, Driscoll did have the ability to fire them according to the bylaws. But they were also elders, and the bylaws didn't have a stipulation for what happened to their status as elders if they were terminated as employees. So Driscoll was strong-arming them: Resign your eldership on the spot, or we're going to hold a trial and disqualify you. For Paul and Bent, that would be tantamount to taking responsibility for their own firing. And so they refused - bring on the trial.

Scott Thomas: So that's what kicked it off. But they saw that there was like more and more control being moved toward Mark and away from the elders, and that was their fear, and their fear was justified.

Mike Cospser: There are a lot of twists and turns to this story, too many to detail here in a coherent way. The Petrys have posted most of it online at joyfulexiles.com, in case you want to get into the weeds. Otherwise, know that what's presented here is a CliffNotes.

The Petrys and the Meyers were beloved families at Mars Hill. In their roles as pastors, they'd done countless hours of counseling and care, teaching classes on marriage and parenting, and investing their lives in younger folks around them. If there had been a calculus in Driscoll's mind that he could fire them without consequences, he was wrong.

Here's Wendy Alsup again.

Wendy Alsup: And the first thing I thought is, I didn't even know you could fire elders like that. So one elder can just write that the other elders are fired and that's how a plurality of elders work? But that was the moment.... I remember Andy looking at me in the car and he said, Mark just fired the wrong two guys. And we tried so hard. We love Bent and Paul, and we loved Mark, and we wanted them to reconcile because, you know what, it was foolish to fire them. They were his elders. Mark was their elder, they were his elders, there was a plurality of elders, and they should have been able to work that out. It was not the kind of thing that could not have been worked out.

Mike Cospser: The affection the community had for Paul and Bent was matched by their love for the church. Before coming to Mars Hill, Paul had been an attorney, but as so often happens in church planting, his investment in the growing community led to an invitation to set aside that career and come on staff.

Paul Petry: When they asked me to come on staff, I just looked back on my life and I thought, Wow, everything that's happened to me led up to this point in time, and it just all made sense. And I think a lot of people that were there from the early days up until that point - I can certainly say this - I think it was some of the best days of my life. And I would say from a standpoint of being a part of a church and that, I don't think I've ever regained an experience like that, and I think that's very hard for a lot of people as well.

Mike Cospser: The day after their firing, Driscoll spoke at an event for pastors on preaching,

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and it was in this context, after firing Bent and Paul, that he made his now infamous comments about the bus.

Mark Driscoll: Too many guys waste too much time trying to move stiff-necked, stubborn, obstinate people. I am all about blessed subtraction. There is a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus, and by God's grace, it'll be a mountain by the time we're done. You either get on the bus or you get run over by the bus. Those are the options, but the bus ain't gonna stop. We just took certain guys and rearranged the seats on the bus. Yesterday we fired two elders for the first time in the history of Mars Hill. Last night, they're off the bus, under the bus. They were off mission, so now they're unemployed. This will be the defining issue as to whether or not you succeed or fail. I've read enough of the New Testament to know that occasionally Paul put somebody in the wood-chipper.

Mike Cospers: That same day, Scott Thomas was assigned to lead an elder investigation task force, looking into charges from Driscoll that Paul and Bent had disqualified themselves as elders.

Scott Thomas: What we determined with a group of godly men who were coming together, and what we would determined was Paul nor Bent had done anything to disqualify themselves from eldership. And that was our report. I've got the full report right now, but we determined there was nothing to disqualify them from eldership.

Mike Cospers: You would think with a conclusion like that, it would be an open and shut case with the rest of the elders. But there's a weird disconnect that happens in the middle of this. The team that Scott Thomas was leading, investigating Paul and Bent did clear them of wrongdoing, but they didn't communicate that to them directly. Instead, in all the formal communications that I've seen, they've simply said that the investigation was complete and that Paul and Bent didn't need to attend their own trial before the rest of the elders. Remember that Paul's an attorney too, so the idea that he's not allowed to attend a trial in which he's accused of disqualifying behavior is anathema. Meanwhile, communication's already gone out to all of the members, announcing that they've been fired and are under investigation. The letter does note that there's no moral or sexual impropriety, but it's otherwise ambiguous as to what they'd done. And it then tells the church that they're not allowed to talk about it, or it's gossip. So Paul and Bent are in a position where they've been fired, accused of disqualifying behavior, had a cloud thrown over their reputations with the church, aren't being told that the investigation has cleared them, and are being told, Don't come to the trial. The whole thing was a recipe for disaster. The elders eventually relented and invited them to attend.

Scott Thomas: Both came in and spoke. They thought that we were saying they were guilty, and they approached it that way and then began to blast most everybody in the room. And so it didn't help their cause, and so the elders said, We've got to take action now, and it's a different way than what the team that was investigating it... We said they did nothing to disqualify themselves from eldership, but after they spoke, they said maybe they should at least be reprimanded.

Mike Cospers: Brad House had only recently become an elder and he was in the room as well.

Brad House: But when you look at the response, the response was someone who is being questioned, with 20 elders, in just a very aggressive atmosphere, it's really hard in that moment to be able to just calmly respond. And so there's this catch 22. You're being put in a pressure cooker and then being told, look how tense you are, look how defensive you are. Well, you did just put him in a pressure cooker.

Mike Cosper: And of course at the center of that conflict was Mark Driscoll.

Brad House: Mark's a persuasive debater, debate is what he did. So if you were going to debate him, he didn't necessarily always play fair, and so that was his element.

Mike Cosper: Paul's trial was actually on a separate night from Bent Myers. It was on October 15th. And at the end of that night, in spite of the report of the investigation that fully cleared him, the elders voted unanimously to disqualify him from eldership. An email went out to the entire church the next day, telling them so. Bent Meyer's trial was two weeks later, and while he wasn't disqualified as an elder, he was placed on probation. That was far from the end of things, though. There was an uproar with the members over how the whole thing was handled and the elders made efforts to quell them through an online message board and several written communications.

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They also began applying pressure to Paul Petry, indicating that if he took responsibility for events, they could reconcile. He stood his ground though, and on November 2nd, he withdrew his membership. It was a big enough firestorm for the church, that on November 9th, the elders released a 142-page document, including a four-page cover letter from Driscoll blaming Petry for the whole thing. It also includes a flat out denial that his comments in the Nehemiah sermon had anything to do with Petry or Meyer. Then on December 5th, Jamie Munson posted a statement to members, telling them to treat Paul as someone who was an unrepentant unbeliever under church discipline, which meant shunning him and cutting off all the Petry's relationships.

Paul Petry: What really hurt was, if I had done something really sinful - like, let's say I was caught picking up a prostitute or something on Aurora, or having an affair with my secretary or whatever, let's say that something like that would have happened, some really big sort of sin that became public - how would the church have reacted to that? I think what would have happened would be that the women of the church would have got together and started preparing meals, and calling Jonna and saying, Hey how can we serve you, this is terrible what's happened, but we're here, we want to help, those kinds of things. They would not have shunned my family, it wouldn't have happened. But yet that is what happened. And that was devastating. My wife was like...it was a blackout. Nobody called her, nobody contacted her. It was just horrible. And it had a huge, huge effect on my family, on my kids. I could go on. But to me that was the most horrible thing. It was these people that we loved and we counted as our friends didn't even pick up the phone to call.

Mike Cosper: You can look at the whole thing as a series of escalations, a conflict getting elevated one conversation at a time. And for most of the elders, this is all new territory.

Here's Brad House again.

Brad House: At that time, Mike, I was so naive in terms of understanding power dynamics and how much those play into these types of situations. There's just a naiveté about that stuff. And I look back and go, Yeah, definitely some power dynamics and it was hard to know which way is up. At the end of the day, you want to do ministry, you want to help people, and you're like, Man, this is... I didn't sign up for trials. Like, we didn't study this, what's going on.

Mike Cosper: There are good questions to ask about institutional knowledge, about how pastors get trained to handle and de-escalate conflict. About things like trials for elders or church members. Like much of Mars Hills culture, this stuff took on a particularly muscular and aggressive form. But the bigger question, the most obvious question, seems to be the one that no one was willing to ask themselves. And even all these years later, wasn't readily in mind for many of them. All Paul and Bent did was what they'd been asked to do: Review a document and give feedback. It was Driscoll who took to the pulpit and used his sermon as a venue to air his grievances with them. It was Driscoll who by all accounts, verbally assaulted them after that service when they were fired. It was Driscoll who the next day celebrated a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus, and said that he was following the Apostle Paul by putting leaders in the wood-chipper.

Everything that followed in the aftermath was an exercise in systemic gas lighting. Sure, you were mocked in the pulpit, you were verbally abused behind closed doors, your reputation was soiled with the church at large, and now you're forced to defend yourself in a tribunal surrounded by 20 elders. But why are you so mad? As for the rest of those elders, they were caught up in it. They voted to disqualify Paul, to discipline Bent Meyer, and they passed the bylaws, giving up all of their legal governing authority to the board of directors.

Paul Petry: They all just collapsed, and went along with being stripped of their authority without even saying a peep. And I guess they didn't see what the repercussions of that would be long-term. That's all I can guess.

Mike Cosper: Spiritual abuse is what you call it when someone leverages issues of eternal significance or power, including the power to crush dissent. It's because people are invested in their spirituality so deeply that they're susceptible to the manipulations of someone who knows how to traffic in the language and emotions of religion and religious experience.

Christians as a rule are eager for more people to meet Jesus, and it's in the nature of a church like Mars Hill to prioritize that over everything else. And if there's one thing Mars Hill knew how to do, it was leverage the numbers. The clearest evidence is in just how often they cited the numbers throughout their communication with members during this whole series of events. In the email announcing Paul and Bent's firing, there's a preamble about how they're opening up 3,400 new seats and seven new services.

When Paul had been removed from eldership, the email starts off by mentioning Mars Hills' 11th anniversary with more than 6,000 people attending. When trying to quell the uproar among members, an email on October 25th cited 6,400 people in attendance that previous Sunday, also noting that it was 1,500 more people than the last year at that

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time. And there are numerous references to growth throughout the 142-page document that came out in November.

This is the state of emergency. It's equating the growing numbers with the expanding kingdom of God, the need to make more room, the need to keep moving the mission forward. So maybe due process isn't necessary. Maybe information gets siloed or misrepresented. Maybe there's a few dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus. Maybe the elders need to relinquish their authority. But when the growth of the church is made one and the same with the expansion of the kingdom of God, who wants to stand in its way? Don't you care about lost people?

That same year, Lief Moi would be removed from his role as the campus pastor at the Ballard campus, and demoted to part-time work. There was controversy around all of this too. But Leif came back and took the responsibility on himself and he was reinstated as an elder. He ran into legal troubles in 2008, and was disqualified then and removed from leadership. In the midst of all of this transition, Mars Hill also canceled everyone's membership, forcing them to start from scratch, attend membership classes anew, and recommit to a revised members' covenant. Bent Meyer and his family left during this time, as did Wendy and Andy Alsup. In all, almost a thousand people would leave, but it didn't hinder the church's growth. Not hardly.

Paul Petry: After it all happened, the church just took off on this growth boom. They went from, I don't know what it was, somewhere between 4,000 and 6,000 to 15,000, like boom. And so I think that in part was people looking and saying, Oh, I guess we made the right decision.

Mike Cospser: A couple of years later, Mars Hill hired Nick Bogardus to come in and work on their Media and Communications Team. Nick only knew of Mars Hill from a distance. He had actually moved to Seattle after working for a couple of years in Romania. So he came in with no context for this story. Logos Bible Software had just made a deal with Driscoll to include his sermon transcripts in their library of resources, and one of Nick's first jobs was to prep those transcripts for the library.

Nick Bogardus: I got a call from Mark's assistant and he said, We want you to go through all the transcriptions from, I don't know, five or six sermon series, like Genesis, Nehemiah, something else, and we want you to remove every reference to Lief Moi, Paul Petry, Wendy Alsup, and there might've been... Maybe Mike Gunn. I can't remember. There might've been a handful of people. I thought, Well, these people must've done something bad, because they wouldn't ask me to do something like this unless it was really needed. Unless these people had done something worthy of being removed, they should be erased and it's probably okay. So I never asked the question, I just made that assumption. And obviously in hindsight, that wasn't true.

Mike Cospser: In November of 2014, just a couple of weeks after Mark Driscoll resigned from Mars Hill, 18 of the elders who served in 2007, released a letter of apology to Paul Petry and Bent Meyer, clearly stating that their actions were wrong and biased. Brad House and Scott Thomas both signed that letter.

 @nickbogardus

Jamie Munson has never commented on the Mars Hill story publicly, and though he didn't want to be interviewed for this podcast, he did send me a written statement. It reads in part, 'I'm not really interested in talking about bylaws, theology, or leadership structure. I'm more interested in the people and their stories and understanding how my involvement at Mars Hill may have helped or hurt them. I think the real mission at Mars Hill turned out to be the building of Mark's platform and personal empire. I'm not sure it started that way, but that's what it became. Anyone who seemed unnecessary or threatened his agenda simply didn't last. Paul Petry and Bent Meyer were two men who fell victim to the mission and were harshly, carelessly, unjustly, wrongly, and sadly discarded. What happened to them was not right, and I was there for the whole thing. I've since met with and apologized to both Bent and Paul, but I also appreciate this opportunity to do so publicly. To be clear, Bent and Paul were wronged, and I'm sorry for my involvement in that, and the years of damage and pain I helped inflict on their lives and their families. It wasn't right. There's a lot of things I'd go back and change from my time at Mars Hill, and this is at the top of the list.'

Paul Petry: When he was saying those things from the pulpit, I was sitting there thinking, Who's he talking about? I had no idea he was talking about me or about Bent Meyer. It just... it was like, we went to this meeting and it was like we got hit by a freight train.

Mike Cospers: Or a bus.

Paul Petry: Or a bus. Yes, exactly.

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Mike Cospers: Thanks for listening. If you want to support the show, please leave us a rating and a review in iTunes. It'll help other people find us. Subscriptions to CT are one of the best ways to support this kind of journalism. If you want to help us keep doing this kind of work, consider joining today at orderct.com/MarsHill.

The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill is a production of Christianity Today. It's executive produced by Erik Petrik. It's produced, written and edited by Mike Cospers. Joy Beth Smith is our associate producer. Music, sound design and mixing by Kate Siefker. Our theme song is Sticks and Stones by Kings Kaleidoscope. The closing song this week is Return my Heart to my Chest by Joe Day.

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We have a bonus episode next week, following a rabbit trail down the story of Joshua Harris. It's a chance to look at celebrity culture and deconstruction, and understanding what the connection is between the two of them, and what we might learn for the sake of the church. See you next week.