



BONUS EPISODE

I Kissed Christianity Goodbye

After almost two decades, Joshua Harris left ministry battered and exhausted. A few years later, he left the faith altogether. In this bonus episode of the podcast, we try to understand why.

SHOW NOTES

Love it or hate it, if you grew up in a youth group after 1997, you probably had to reckon with Joshua Harris's *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, his treatise on dating and courtship. The book sold millions and made him, in Collin Hansen's terms, an "evangelical boy wonder."

At 29 years old he became the lead pastor of a Maryland megachurch and a rising star in Sovereign Grace Ministries. But when that movement was torn apart by controversy, conflict, and accusations of a systemic cover-up of child abuse, he found himself reeling, unsure of his calling and convictions. He left ministry in 2015, and in 2019, he announced that he no longer identified as a Christian.

In this bonus episode of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, we'll explore Josh's story as a contemporary of Mark Driscoll, someone who was his polar opposite in temperament, and whose struggles in ministry led to a divergent outcome. We'll talk about faith, doubt, and celebrity, and discuss how Christians might think about their own doubts and deconstruction, recognizing them as a normal part of the Christian life.

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MASTHEAD

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

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TRANSCRIPT

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Mike Cospser: In Collin Hanson's 2008 book, *Young, Restless, Reformed*, he profiled seven inflection points for what he saw as catalysts for a renewed interest in reformed theology. Among them were Bethlehem Baptist Church where John Piper was the lead pastor, and the Southern Baptist Seminary under the leadership of Albert Mohler. Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill were chapter seven of that book, and chapter six featured Joshua Harris. Here's Collin Hansen.

 @collinhansen

Collin Hansen: So a lot of what I was doing in *Young, Restless, Reformed* was focusing on that restless part. What I was trying to capture was that this is a new, different movement. This is not the same sort of Presbyterian circles, the same sort of Dutch reformed circles. This was reformed theology, breaking out into places where you least expected it.

And one of those places you least expected it would have been in the charismatic community, in the Pentecostal community. And you didn't expect to see that in these large youth conferences, and you didn't expect to see it from one of the most spectacular boy wonders of evangelical history, in Josh Harris.

I mean, how many people are writing books before they're 18, or at 18, that sell more than a million copies, and you could go certainly around the United States to any corner, especially if you grew up in the nineties or the early to mid 2000s, and immediately everyone you knew as a Christian had either read that book or knew everything about that book, and had a really, really, really strong opinion about that book. Simply put, there just weren't many young Christian leaders who were as influential as Josh Harris.

 @HarrisJosh

Josh Harris: The premise of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* was that sex before marriage was one of the worst, most dangerous things, one of the biggest deals when it came to the list of sins. At least that was the way I thought as a teenager growing up in an evangelical church. And *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* tried to play out the implications of that. Like, if this is really this bad, then we need to take this seriously. So I was a zealous, idealistic kid who was saying, Guys, we need to really love Jesus, we need to honor each other, and so dating is leading to compromise.

There was so much fear around AIDS, there was so much fear around the possibility of unwanted pregnancy and abortion. There were all these bigger battles that were being waged in the culture. And so I basically said we need go a step further, and dating is actually a thing we should avoid. Why put ourselves in a situation where we could compromise?

Mike Cospser: The personalities of Josh Harris and Mark Driscoll couldn't be more different. If Driscoll's Christianity was defined by masculinity, Harris's was defined by a vision of holiness. And if you wanted to think in terms of branding, Mars Hill's was bold and aggressive, and Sovereign Grace Ministries, the network where Harris served, branded itself as friendly and humble. And still there's a lot of common ground.

Both men were talented, charismatic leaders who achieved a significant level of national attention before they turned 30. Their communities had a strong vision of pastoral authority, as well as a central emphasis on reformed doctrine. Harrison and Driscoll both served as council members for the Gospel Coalition, spoke at many of the same confer-

5 MIN

 @tedolsen

ences, including Harris speaking at Mars Hill. They were both young, ambitious leaders in the same movement with many of the same influences around them who tried to help guide them on their way. But just as their personalities diverged, so did their paths. Josh left the pastor in 2015. In 2016, he made comments on Twitter, apologizing for the impact of his book, and then expanded that apology in a TED Talk in 2017. He released a full length documentary recanting much of the book in 2018. And then in July 2019, he and his wife, Shannon, announced they were getting a divorce. A week later, Josh shared that he no longer identified as a Christian.

That story has countless parallels in the lives of other Christians who experience ruptures in their churches, abusive leadership cultures, and other spiritual disasters that led them away from the church. That's also the story of many former members of Mars Hill. And it's why we wanted to hear from Josh Harris. Here's Christianity Today's executive editor, Ted Olsen.

Ted Olsen: As I said before, the word platforming is a lame word. It makes sense very much in the 2021 mode where the question is, Why would you ever listen to that kind of person? There's this new fundamentalism of separation being the most important marker of purity. So not just have you separated from the bad person, but have you separated from the people who haven't separated? That double separation is almost huge in historic fundamentalism.

I'm like, We can talk to people we disagree with. That's really good. And to talk to them, and to even talk to them publicly, is not necessarily a platform or to say, This person is an authority or this person... I appreciate that this whole podcast is based on the idea of, We want to hear from people who were in the room. There's this line of journalism, If your mother says she loves you, check it out. To me, how else are you going to tell the Mark Driscoll story without talking to the people who were actually there in the room? So I'm like, Yeah, let's talk to those guys. I think it matters, what happened. The where are they now, the extending out in the story, I think that does matter. So I'm eager for us to hear what happened to Josh Harris as much, in some ways, as much as I'm interested in hearing what happened to Mars Hill.

Mike Cospoer: Frankly, we could have made three different versions of the podcast based on the different versions of Josh I've been in conversation with over the last several months.

The first one, last spring, seemed to want to stay away from being a spiritual guru. Then last week, he released a free ebook and a guided course to help others through their own deconstruction process. You could pay \$275 for that course, or if you've been hurt by Josh's work, you could, on the honor system, enter a code and download it for free.

And then things shifted again later in the week, when after a lot of negative feedback, especially from within the community of exvangelicals online, he pulled the course and apologized.

My conclusion is that at some level, I think Josh and I were working at the same task, trying to understand just who is Josh Harris. One thing these events did seem to confirm

is that some of the impulses that made him a star in the nineties are still there.

Collin Hansen: Despite the dramatic differences in personality. I can tell you, I don't know of two people with more different personalities than Mark Driscoll and Josh Harris. You would never think that they are in the same world in terms of their personality, but both of them are gifted in other worldly ways at being able to market a message, and in many ways at being able to market themselves.

Mike Cospers: From Christianity today, I'm Mike Cospers and you're listening to a bonus episode of the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. This is the story of a young, charismatic kid that wrote a book that had a love it or hate it impact on a generation. A kid who became the rising star of a movement. And when controversy tore that movement apart, he examined his past and lost his faith.

It's a story that echoes the experiences of many who were wounded by the church, or burned out by ministry, or otherwise left feeling like the ground collapsed beneath their feet. And it's a story I believe about a gospel that confronts that brokenness, a gospel that's better news than the one that's shared in toxic systems, and about a God who leaves the 99 for the one. On today's episode, we're not just looking at Josh Harris. We're looking at what happens when Christians see the fallout of broken communities and say, I kissed Christianity goodbye.

Josh's parents were leaders in the homeschool movement, and his dad was an author of several books on the subject. When Josh was still a teenager, he was speaking on that conference circuit, publishing a magazine for other homeschool teens. 1997 marked two milestones that would define most of the next two decades. He published *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, and he moved into C.J. Mahaney's basement and began serving at Covenant Life Church.

The book challenged teens to give up dating and embrace courtship, only pursuing romance when they were ready for marriage, and submitting their dating lives to the oversight of their parents. It would sell more than a million copies. It's been the subject of a great deal of scrutiny in more recent years, but back then, closer to its release, Josh was pretty insulated from that criticism.

Josh Harris: It took a long time for me to register the critique that was coming. One of the first that I remember was *Boundaries In Dating* was a book that came out that specifically addressed *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, and that's kind of what happened was other books on dating had to address the elephant in the room, which was this mindset that dating was wrong. And they sought to do that in a thoughtful, biblical way of saying, Here's the text that addresses this mindset, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* isn't everything, it's maybe an unhealthy way of dealing with it. And that troubled me.

10 MIN

I remember being in a Barnes and Noble, reading this, just standing in the bookstore, reading this going, whoa. And I remember going to C.J. Mahaney, who was my mentor, and communicating that I was troubled by this. And he essentially challenged me like, Josh, you're being too concerned about people's criticism, and part of being a good leader is you don't bow to this kind of criticism, you've gotta be strong. And so I kinda

took that to heart. Oh boy, I need to be a strong leader and just stand my ground. And now I look back on that. That's not C.J.'s fault, I needed to be more willing to think for myself. That's part of the problem that I experienced. But that was a key moment of really not listening.

Mike Cospers: It's easy when ministry feels like a success to ignore the critics, to throw holy water on your defense mechanisms, and keep yourself from noticing the negative impact of your work or the flaws in the culture of your ministry.

Josh Harris: You want to hear a weird Don Miller, Mark Driscoll connection point. I can't remember the year, but I was invited to speak at one of the events - I guess it was one of the Resurgence events or something - that Driscoll was doing. So I went out to Seattle. Don had been invited to speak at that as well, but he decided not to speak at it because I think he was starting to be concerned with some of the stuff that Driscoll was doing.

He was big time. Blue Like Jazz was a huge book, had so much cultural influence among Christians and so on. But he drove up to just sit in so that we could grab lunch together. And it's just so funny to look back on this and think about this. Because I was in this really conservative...The truth be told, I was concerned for Don. His theology was really troubling and I had this real sense of superiority. And I remember we went out to lunch and I was talking about our church and how great it was and how amazing it was that we were reformed, and we were charismatic, and the church was just so humble. And Don just said, Boy, if you guys are so humble, it's just surprising that you're so aware of it. And I was just inside like, Oh crap. And it was so true. It was like, we were proud of our humility, and he called me out on that. I had no response. Years later I went back to him and was like, Oh man, you saw things I didn't see at the time.

Mike Cospers: That sense of having it all together began to unravel in 2009, when a former leader of Sovereign Grace Ministries' board of directors or Apostolic team, named Brent Detwiler, took a longstanding conflict with the ministry's leadership public. In particular, he accused Mahaney of a pattern of pride, deception, and hypocrisy, and he accused the board of directors of shielding Mahaney from accountability. In the years that would follow, others would begin publishing their own accounts of abuse of authority from inside Sovereign Grace churches, on blogs and social media. That controversy led to a leave of absence from Mahaney so that charges against him could be reviewed. He was reinstated a few months later.

Josh had been the lead pastor of Covenant Life Church, which was Sovereign Grace's flagship church, since Mahaney had stepped into full-time leadership of the network in 2004. He'd been Mahaney's protege, but the emergence of these conflicts drove a wedge between them.

Josh Harris: We'd all been tied together under this brand of, We are Sovereign Grace, you can walk into our church and you'll get the same great experience as you do... It's like Starbucks of churches. Well, when you find out that some of the beans are poisoned, that affects the entire brand, right? And so all of that was taking place, all of that was falling apart behind the scenes. And when it did, I made choices as a local pastor and it involved not just defending C.J. and the other apostles.

Mike Cosper: During that time, Josh began to recognize that there were elements of Sovereign Grace's culture that were rigid and legalistic in ways that were extra-biblical. That included issues like child rearing, homeschooling, women working outside the home, and courtship and dating.

Josh Harris: All these years of that kind of incredible pressure and manipulation and control was just coming out in a lot of painful stories, and they were sharing those. And our pastoral team ended up coming to the church and apologizing for some of these practices that we started to see. But that was the first time that I thought, Oh my goodness, my book played a part in this, my book was a big part of creating a culture.

Mike Cosper: Churches in crisis face a tension. It happened here and it happened at Mars Hill as well. It emerges when members and leaders try to discern the difference between gossip or slander and the need for transparency. Because on the one hand, gossip and slander are very real things and they're dangerous and divisive. But on the other hand, there's a clear pattern in churches in conflict, where leaders who want to quell the conflict address it by calling it all gossip and labeling those who are sharing their stories as divisive or wolves. This was the tension that emerged for Harris, and it's what drove the wedge between Covenant Life and Sovereign Grace.

Josh Harris: We just had this massive fissure in this movement where one side was saying, We need to listen to these hurt people, and the other side was saying, These people need to cease and desist, don't read the blogs, don't listen to any of this. So our church ended up withdrawing from the movement.

Mike Cosper: Shortly after that withdrawal, a civil lawsuit was filed, alleging a pattern of mishandling sexual abuse cases inside Sovereign Grace churches going back for decades. Eventually, 11 plaintiffs would join the case in total. Many leaders and pastors were implicated in the allegations, both directly and indirectly, including both Harris and Mahaney. Ultimately, the cases were dismissed. Nine because the statute of limitations had been exceeded, and two others for being filed in the wrong state. Those were never refiled. Sovereign Grace treated this as a vindication though. But a number of outside critics reject that framing.

Rachael Denhollander, for instance, a lawyer and victim's advocate, has been raising concerns about these issues since her role as a whistleblower in the Larry Nassar case brought her to the national spotlight a few years ago. You heard from Denhollander on a previous episode of the podcast. In her criticism of the handling of these issues, she's gone so far as to call it one of the most well-documented cases of institutional coverup she's ever seen. Covenant Life church would eventually hire an attorney to look into their own handling of the issues. It was not an independent third-party investigation though, and it had a number of flaws, including the attorney's lack of criminal experience and close ties to the church. In addition, many of those implicated, such as Mahaney and other Sovereign Grace leaders, would not participate in the investigation, and the attorneys failed to interview some victims and witnesses. And these are just a few of the handful of issues Denhollander raised. Even so, there was a moment in the process of the investigation that struck home for Josh.

Josh Harris: We get a call from that attorney, who is like, I want to share the findings with you, you guys made some massive mistakes, some key mistakes in how you... You should have reported things to the police and you didn't. And I had been in a mindset of saying, You know what, if guys on my team have made significant mistakes, no matter how much I love them, even if they are well-intentioned, I need to be willing to let them go, fire them, to protect the church and so on. And this guy's on the phone saying, This is the most significant mistake, When this person came back and asked this and told you this, you should have gone to the police at that time, you tried to handle it in a reconciliation kind of format and so on. And Josh, you were the leader at that time. And I... That was the first time that I considered that maybe I wasn't going to be the pastor of Covenant Life for 30 years like C.J., like John Piper had been at Bethlehem, like John MacArthur was of his church. That was my whole structure and vision of my life, and that moment of realizing my own failure was really the beginning of a lot of my own self-identity falling apart.

Mike Cosper: In the years since, Denhollander and others have continued to call for a truly independent third-party investigation into the handling of these abuse cases by Sovereign Grace. Christianity Today joined that call for an investigation in March of 2018 in an editorial by Mark Galli. JD Greer, then president of the Southern Baptist convention, and Albert Mohler, president of Southern Seminary, raised similar concerns in 2019, with Mohler in particular stating the need for an investigation. In an email exchange with Josh, he added his voice to the call as well, saying I'd 100% support an independent investigation into Sovereign Grace. As of their most recent statement, Sovereign Grace reiterated that they believe such an investigation is unwarranted and unnecessary.

By the beginning of 2015, Harris had pastored Covenant Life Church through five years of conflict, separation from Sovereign Grace, and significant internal revisions around governance. He'd also lost his mother to cancer, lost his relationship to Mahaney, his mentor, and he'd begun to reckon with the reality that his book had been the source of pain in the lives of many who read it or were brought up under its framework of expectations. He was exhausted, uncertain about the future, and for the first time since he was a teenager, unsure about what he believed anymore. So on January 25th, 2015, he shared with his congregation that he was moving on.

Josh Harris: This is what I'm realizing: I need to hear clearly from Jesus about his purpose for me. Losing my mom a few years, turning 40 last year, it's been a gut check for me. I'm asking the question: What does it mean for me to be faithful, to fulfill God's purpose for me in my generation, with the remaining time that I have in this life. I've had many people over the years tell me what God's purpose for my life is, and what I'm learning is that only Jesus can place a call on my life. I can't live someone else's plan for my life. I can't even live my plan for my life. I need to live Jesus' plan for my life.

Mike Cosper: Just a few months later, Josh and his family moved all the way across the continent from Maryland to Vancouver, where he'd enrolled in seminary at Regent College. Prior to this, he had never been in an actual classroom before. It was all home-school and pastoral training at the church. But as much as education was a part of the equation, his bigger goal was just to make space, to look back on his life and figure out how he'd gotten to this place, tired, feeling the burden of his failures and the sadness of

his disappointments.

Josh Harris: When I think about my own life, a lot of that was shaped by my own ambition. Like it's really important for me to recognize, Okay, sure, people taught me things, they were older, they should've been more responsible. But I have to keep owning the fact that, Man, I wanted all this. I wanted the acclaim, I wanted the best-selling book, I wanted to be famous, I wanted the security of being in the right camp that was better than all the other camps. So I bought into it. You know? I completely threw myself into that. And yeah, that's just, I think, an important thing for me to own, and also to now need to sift through, what's real and what isn't real.

Mike Cospers: These questions about story and identity were as much a motivator for this move to Vancouver as any of the theological questions, and maybe more so. But part of what makes Josh's story unique is that no matter what, he's Josh Harris. Or as Collin Hansen put it: Evangelical Wonder Boy, Josh Harris, a guy who'd sold more than a million books and been the poster child for the purity movement.

If your average pastor moved to Vancouver and deconstructed his faith, would anyone hear it? Would it make the news? Likely not. And yet in 2016, a year into his trip out west, even the first hint that his mind might be changing about some things, ended up being newsworthy. It all started on Twitter.

Josh Harris: Someone said, Your book was used against me like a weapon. And I said, I'm so sorry. And that ended up getting picked up and being broadcast on different articles: Josh Harris is apologizing. And so then people were mad that I was apologizing and then other people were mad that I wasn't apologizing enough. And I just said, Wait a second, I need to do a real thorough, thoughtful evaluation of this. And so I used the context of my seminary study to do a guided study of reading things from a sociological standpoint, from a Christian history standpoint, to understand, Why did I think the way I did, what was the actual impact of that? And the end result of that journey was recognizing, Wow, on balance this was really negative, and if I've seen that it had this negative effect, I can't support it still being out there. The publisher agreed to discontinue publishing the book, which I really appreciate.

Mike Cospers: Part of the effort to reckon with the book developed after he met a fellow student at Regent named Jessica Van Der Wyngaard. She had a background in filmmaking and was planning on producing a documentary about deconstructing purity culture as part of her graduate thesis. Josh showed up about a year after her, and he was having a lot of conversations about the way his book had impacted other students.

Jessica Van Der Wyngaard: The filmmaker in me was like, Wow, this would be a really good way to tell this story. You've got someone's narrative to structure a documentary around. That's going to be great. He was on the fence about it for about eight months, we discussed it back and forth after I pitched it to him, and then he agreed to do it.

Mike Cospers: They launched a Kickstarter campaign and raised about 55,000 Canadian dollars. The resulting film was called, I Survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye. In it, Josh travels the country and meets with people who were impacted by his book, as well as theolo-

 @wheredowegopod

gians and other Christian leaders who think and write about dating, marriage and sex.

Josh Harris: I was afraid, afraid to face my critics, but also afraid to disappoint my fans, the people who still loved my book. I knew I needed to jump, but I couldn't. Leave it to social media to push me over the edge.

Mike Cospers: The project took the better part of two years. They screened a rough cut of it in June, 2018, at Regent, and then premiered the finished film that fall at a film festival in Franklin, Tennessee. It was also picked up by a faith-based film distributor called Exploration Films.

Jessica Van Der Wyngaard: The greatest irony for me in all of this, in making this documentary about purity culture, which is really what the film's about, even though it tells Josh's story, is that I was intent that we're making a film that shows you don't have to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Little did I know that Josh's unraveling was on a far deeper level than he ever shared, or he ever acknowledged until much, much later.

Mike Cospers: Jessica was as surprised as anyone in July of 2019 to hear the news on Instagram that Josh and his wife, Shannon, were separating. And then she was surprised again, just a few days later, when he announced that he no longer identified as a Christian. Within a few days, Exploration Films announced that they were no longer promoting the film. And now Jessica has a complicated relationship with it.

Jessica Van Der Wyngaard: One of the hardest things for me is trying to think about how do I say sorry to the people who put in their money to make this film, the 400 people who gave out of the generosity of their own deconstruction, but holding on to their faith, and the faith they put in me and Josh to put together a film, and it hurts my heart when I think about it.

Mike Cospers: Clearly, Josh wasn't finished with his journey when he made the film, so it represents a way point for him and not a destination. And to me, hearing Jessica's story speaks again to the perils of celebrity. It's so tempting to look for a mascot for our spiritual journeys and to hang our hats on them as representations of us, that what we share with them helps validate us. And then when they disappoint, it's disorienting and it hurts at a deep level, in spite of the fact that Jessica's own journey and her own work - just like that of so many other voices in the film - has a dignity and validity all its own. I think it speaks to the way something about celebrity culture has a hold on our imaginations. Josh didn't leave ministry, land in Vancouver and quietly deconstruct into a new life. Instead, he broadcast his process, literally, on social media and on film. And by nature of the relationships evangelicals have with celebrity, and because of the impact he had on our culture, he had an audience for the whole thing.

Here's Ted Olson again.

Ted Olsen: Josh Harris is going to be still an evangelical celebrity, even if he's not a Christian. He's going to be mostly a recognized name among evangelicals, no matter what his next steps are. In the same way that even after someone becomes an exevangelical celebrity, evangelicals are going to talk about that person for the next 50 years still. They're

going to be an example of something, and sometimes not always in healthy ways.

Mike Cospers: After the break, you'll hear some of my conversation with Josh, trying to grapple with the process of deconstruction, questions about misunderstanding the gospel, and why one might want to quit evangelicalism, but might not quit evangelizing.

We'll be right back.

In his Instagram post about losing his faith, Josh described it as a process of deconstructing, and it's not hard to find that language in a lot of conversations right now among people who grew up evangelical, but don't identify with it anymore. The whole idea is nothing new though. There's a long history and even a rich tradition of Christians wrestling with doubt and deconstruction, both in those who wrestle and fall away, and those who come back. Evangelicalism has its own history of this too, including Charles Templeton, a good friend of Billy Graham who partnered with him in ministry throughout the 1940s, but began to lose his grip on faith in the 1950s. That was a critical time in Graham's life as well, coming to the brink of his own doubts and insecurity. But Graham experienced a kind of spiritual renewal while reading scripture and praying in the San Bernardino mountains. Templeton lost his faith, and because of his close relationship with Graham was a controversial figure amongst evangelicals for the rest of his life. Today, you'll often hear the word exvangelical in these conversations, and that represents a pretty wide spectrum of people who no longer want to identify with evangelicalism. Some simply want to reject the term. Others have rejected the faith altogether, and some of them going so far as to gather online around hashtags, like empty the pews, arguing that the church itself is a destructive force in the culture. What seems consistent though, is the degree to which people's stories and experiences have driven their process.

30 MIN

Josh Harris: It wasn't for me, this theological question came up and I couldn't reconcile it, and that type of thing. It was really, I think, the outworking of the hurt that was there. Processing what we experienced in this church was traumatic. The decisions that we made in trying to do what we thought was right, causing us to lose all these relationships. Literally, if you're not loyal, you are cut off. And so the shift from being the sort of golden boy of Sovereign Grace, and C.J.'s protege, to being essentially blamed for things falling apart. Like if you had just stood up and rebuked people for gossip and slander and told them not to read things on the internet, and defended the leadership, we would have held the line.

Mike Cospers: By moving away from Covenant Life Church and taking the pressure of ministry off for a season, it allowed him to ask questions that pastors are often afraid of asking.

Josh Harris: Step one was, I don't want to be a pastor anymore. That was huge, to be able to admit that when so much of my identity was wrapped up in that. Step two was starting this process of listening to people who had been hurt by my book, and recognizing that even with good intentions you can build something that's actually damaging to people. You can think you're loading people up with grace and you're actually loading them down with man-made rules. And behind the scenes, there was a lot that was falling apart in my marriage. My wife and I ended up deciding to end our marriage, and when that was made public, again, a whole other layer of identity. And I think that my

process of deconstruction is so wrapped up in all of those things, so much of what I gave myself to, so many of the people that presented all these truths to me, so much of that fell apart, that I just needed to be at a place of saying, I need to step away from all of it. I don't want to be trying to justify, explain, defend anything. I need the space to be able to figure out what is and isn't real, apart from all of that pressure.

Sometimes people, they talk about deconstruction as if it's like this beautiful, perfectly guided process of a Lego castle that you step-by-step...You take one lego off, you deconstruct it. I think some people might have that experience. My experience was circumstances coming, just stomping the hell out of my Lego castle. Just my own failure and things falling apart and relationships being broken. And I'm just trying to pick up the pieces, but I don't want anybody telling me, You've got to build back the castle exactly like this. I'm just like, Please leave me alone and let me try to figure some of these things out, because the way that I've been living has not led to life and expansion and love, it's led to a narrower and narrower controlling, fearful outlook. And I know that doesn't represent all Christians, but it represented the brand of Christianity that completely shaped me for so long.

Mike Cosper: I remember hearing a pastor a few years ago. He was a mega church pastor, and he'd left his church... He hadn't left the faith, but he was deconstructing the whole sort of megachurch phenomenon, which is fine, but what struck me when I heard him talk, he said, it was such a performance for me, I lived this performative life and I pushed these performative doctrines. And his framing was... At the end of the day, his framing was I just want to try to make it right. But there's part of me that wonders for you - and maybe this is like the old pastor in me putting his hat on..

Josh Harris: I love it.

Mike Cosper: ...so forgive me. But part of me wonders for you. It's almost like this, like when we realize we've failed as leaders and caused wounds and hurt and all of this, particularly like when I think about your story and the degree to which part of your journey was this discovery that for as many times a week as you probably used the word gospel, there was a whole lot of law in the culture you were teaching, and a very sort of moralistic set of expectations. And there's part of me that wonders, again, like the reformed guy in my heart is running the show at the moment. Like, the solution to your awakening could have been, Oh, I need the gospel, instead of the floor coming out. The answer being, I need to be reformed again, like I need the reformation of my own heart in the sense that what was exposed was the power of law that had been at work, and that had been incredibly destructive.

And I say that because what I then worry about is that the reactivity could be, This is the new law, this is the new path, I want to invite people to walk this way, because this way will liberate them. When again, the gospel would go, Man, that way is not going to liberate them either. Like, that way is going to... Your vision quest, isn't gonna... You know what I mean? You know all the metaphors, right? Like, where I feel like the exposure of failure is the invitation to go, Yeah, repentance is the way of life here. Man, we blew this, let's reform, let's call out the sins of our organization.

Josh Harris: Which we definitely tried to do. I think that is... I think that was the good response. And I think the Christian message provides that life, that pathway of constant repentance. So I mean when I put my Christian hat on, I would just say absolutely. The church should be known for its repentance, right? If it believes everything that you're describing about the gospel and that reforming work of the Holy Spirit, it should be known for constantly repenting. So I think that's beautiful and I would love to be a part of encouraging that response in people who are still in churches. And I might end up in the church again, down the road. I don't want to shut the door to that. I still do struggle with even what you described as the gospel over and against law, there's still a part of me that says it's still a good news that if you don't receive you go to hell forever. If that is at the very core of the message, does that justify the kind of manipulative, controlling, abusive behavior?

Mike Cosper: I think part of the reason we're in this project is to try to sort of as strongly as we can say, that it absolutely doesn't. The way that evangelical celebrity culture in particular has allowed the fallout of bad leaders get framed in a transactional way is massively problematic. The heart of our repentance is the fact that we've allowed this sort of calculation to take place that goes... It's the quote in every interview I did for Mars Hill, which was, Yeah, this was a disaster and everybody knew it was, but Hey, look at the fruit. And you hear that in church after church after church. But I don't think that's inherent to the message. I think inherent to the message is, Lay down and die. Inherent to the message is Philippians two, and the story of the gospels, and Jesus going to the weak and the oppressed and not favoring the rich and not favoring the religious.

I think so much of where we are is this syncretism around cultural power and influence. And I would even go so far as to say this: I think the phenomenon of celebrity - and this is where I would challenge you - in a secular age, celebrity itself is the closest thing we have to spiritual transcendence. It's the one place we still believe in it, because it's the one place where people last. A president lasts. And we literally... Like icon is a sacred term. Icon is a reference to sacred art, and we use icon today all the time for celebrities. And so I think there's this gravity towards charismatic celebrity types, because by nature of the fact that they're famous, they carry an authority that has a gravitas in our culture that Joe pastor down the street at First United Methodist doesn't have. And so it's a window to... Again, like icon, I think, is such a perfect language because the icon is this art that you look through into something sublime, I think celebrity kind of functions the same way.

Josh Harris: Yeah. If I could just push back a little bit, maybe, on what you're saying, the issue of celebrity is something that at times bothers me. And maybe it's being defensive because obviously I have had my, I would say maybe 13 minutes of fame, not even 15.

Mike Cosper: You're definitely evangelical famous even now.

Josh Harris: I think the thing is that I guess I can feel like it's an easy out for Christians who I think need to ask deeper questions about core theologies and systemic issues. And I'm not saying it's not problematic, I'm not saying it doesn't go against some of the ideals of the Christian faith. But I'm just saying that I think that it's a scapegoat at times in a way that allows them to write off the systemic issues and not evaluate them. And I think you

have to ask the question, if it's such a problem, then are the kind of core celebrities of the Bible problematic? Because while Christians can emphasize the message of the gospel is lay down your life and be the meek and mild, humble servant, and so on, why are we all still talking about Jesus? Because he is the most famous person in world history.

Mike Cosper: Okay. That's silly, right? But we're talking about...

Josh Harris: What I'm saying is what I'm saying is that Jesus... Okay, let's assume He's the son of God. The path of the cross is the path to exaltation and the exaltation of Jesus does involve - if you want to use the word celebrity - celebrity. Now, I think that's a really flippant way of describing it, but I think we use celebrity in flippant ways to criticize other people as well.

Mike Cosper: There's this idea... We'll take Jesus out of it for a moment and maybe we can come back to it, right? Like why will Churchill be remembered for generations, for millennia probably. Churchill is going to be remembered because he was a man of a certain kind of virtue, obviously a man with a ton of floss, but a man with a certain kind of virtue and fortitude and courage, whose actions erupted into the world in a way that was transformative to the world. And that's why everybody knows who he is. And so you can take that and go, Okay, that's the kind of fame that's about virtue in action. The flip side of that is like the kind of fame that would be like Hitler, right? I realize we're at Godwin's law now because we're at Hitler again. It's a different kind of fame, but it's the same principle, which is someone acted out of their character. They acted in the world and they affected it and they transformed it. What we live with - and this is where I think the celebrity thing becomes problematic and where I think Christianity in particular, but culture in general, needs to ask it - is that there's a new phenomenon of fame, which is fame without... Not just fame without virtue, but fame without action. What we have is... and this would be my challenge to you. We have a culture where gathering a following and broadcasting yourself is a skillset and the best embodiment of it. There's this great quote. The best embodiment of it is Kim Kardashian. Because what's Kim famous for? She's beautiful, but there's lots of beautiful people in the world, and you can say like this, that, and the other happened to her, but there's lots of people who did those things who have parallels to Kim, but there's something unique about her.

So anyway, the reason I always think of her is The Guardian did a profile of her years ago, and this reporter spends like a couple of days just trying to understand how she works and how her empire works. Towards the end of his time with her, he got exasperated, and he says to her, I don't understand, I still don't understand you in your world, what is your talent? And her response to him is, she says, You can teach a bear to stand on a ball and juggle, and he's talented, but he's not famous. That's her answer. So there's a fame and celebrity thing that is about knowing the mechanics of gathering a crowd, of marketing yourself. And I guess I would say what I wonder for you in this transition for you is whether it was intentional or not, you totally had those skills as the young, gifted communicator that was the embodiment of the purity movement. Cynically - and I recognize this is cynical, and I like you, so I'm not trying to be harsh, so take it that way - but this is like the rebrand. But the mechanics of it are going to be the same skillset.

Josh Harris: I think all your statements are accurate in terms of people's giftings and

how that can be used and all those things, and I think that's something that I have to wrestle with and deal with myself. Am I doing that? Maybe. Could be. Those kind of deep motivations. I think there's just enough Calvinism in me to really be distrustful of myself and say, Yeah, maybe that could be it.

Mike Cospers: Yeah.

Josh Harris: I think it's interesting though. I would just say, even someone like a Churchill, would we know about Churchill if Hitler hadn't invaded? Circumstances create opportunities for people, and I think you're absolutely right in terms of his virtues and strength in those moments. I also think he was not bad at a turn of phrase. From a marketing standpoint, he was able to move people with words and ideas in a way that cause us to remember him and appreciate him in a unique way. So it's a fascinating thing about the way humans work. I think the ability to understand how to capture people's attention, to focus that in a particular direction, to maintain it. It's an incredible... If you have it, is it better to bury it because it's possibly dangerous? But it's a scary thing. I feel that. I feel that for the stuff that I'm doing.

45 MIN

Mike Cospers: And so you feel the confidence then that as someone who was an evangelist before, and now in a sense, you're still evangelizing but you're evangelizing in another direction, you feel confident... The convictions now are the right convictions?

Josh Harris: I definitely don't have that confidence that I used to have. I definitely do not have that. I think that I feel a sense of unique responsibility because of what I propagated in the past to raise awareness that there are alternatives to it.

Mike Cospers: This conversation happened a couple of days after Josh released his curriculum online; a \$275 guided study to help people understand their own deconstruction. A couple of days later, after lots of pushback, he pulled it down. As I've thought about Josh's story, there are two things that come to mind for me. The first is the degree to which it's shaped by his status as a celebrity, or in more modern terms, an influencer. The whole influencer phenomenon is unique in that it's about modeling a lifestyle and a worldview, usually through the lens of social media. It makes me think again about the word icon. To what degree are Instagram posts from influencers a window into the divine for a secular age, ways of worshiping a little pantheon of gods that represent sex or money or beauty or power or spiritual enlightenment, including the enlightenment of having deconstructed.

Broadcasting yourself in that way is a skillset, and Josh has had instincts that enabled him to do that since he was a teenager. It does seem like the launch of his deconstruction resources was a miscalculation, but I also imagine that's not the last time we'll see him working through some of that online.

The other thing that comes to mind for me is how the exvangelical phenomenon is itself an expression of evangelical culture. It has its own gathering of celebrities, its own code of ethics, its own sense of who's in and who's out. And as Josh learned the hard way last week, its own gatekeepers. What I think is visible in the phenomenon is the centrality of people's stories and experiences as the core impetus for the movement.

Part of my hope in telling the Mars Hill story is to highlight how deep the spiritual and psychological damage of church-related hurt can be. I hope that conservative evangelicals can listen to those stories before they go about defending their doctrine, that we can grieve the pain, and repent of the ways we've contributed to it.

At the same time. I hope that those who've been hurt by the church can have a hunger for the truth as they go about their deconstruction. I spoke to Matthew Lee Anderson about this, a Scholar of Ethics and Theology at Baylor University's Institute for the Studies of Religion, and author of *The End of Our Exploring*, a book about asking good questions in the search for truth.

 @mattleeanderson

Matthew Lee Anderson: They had a certain sort of experience as a community, and that experience was very bad. I don't think it's the mainstream evangelical experience. I think a lot of people who have experienced, who are now exevangelicals or who are reacting against this thing, had sociologically actually quite marginal experiences within sight of evangelicalism. But they were very bad experiences. And they're trying to make sense of that, and finding people who can sympathize with them, who they can identify with, and that provides a certain sort of comfort and security for them. And I understand that and I appreciate that, but that to me seems something very different than deep, difficult self-examination in order to find the truth in the sense that there's a sort of quest for understanding the world and making sense of the world around us, that I think gets corrupted once it takes this sort of publicized form, and when it takes a deliberately contrarian form, where what you're trying to do is actually critique and take down the structures that you've left behind.

Mike Cospers: To me, this raises an important question for those of us who might have deconstructing impulses at heart: What are we after? What's our motivating spirit? The contrast Matthew kept reinforcing in our conversation was the gap between a reactionary spirit that wants to reject the community of our youth, and a spirit driven by the quest for truth, whatever it might cost to find it. I'll confess that I think negative church experiences are maybe more pervasive than Anderson does, and that's one reason why I'm making this podcast. But I also agree wholeheartedly that the answer to our pain shouldn't be to turn it into a weapon to tear down all communities of faith. I get that impulse. I felt it myself and I still feel it at times while reporting on these stories. But when we're feeling that mix of sorrow and anger, we should also ask ourselves critical questions too, like, What are we seeking? What do we hope to find? Are we simply engaged in a project of deconstructing the places and people that hurt us, or are we genuinely seeking the truth and willing to embrace it, however it may reveal itself to us.

50 MIN

Matthew Lee Anderson: I think we have to think a lot about what constitutes a satisfactory answer to our questions. What would you have to see or understand? What does it feel like to get an answer to your question? And there is a kind of depth and coherence and beauty and goodness that a really satisfying answer provides you. A sense of stability and place and home. It's a place where you can rest. It's not a final resting place, you're still gonna move again, but you can rest for a moment. And I think that the types of Christianity that tend to rush into the void when people ask those questions, don't have that sense of rest about them, there's a great deal of anxiety within them. And I think that anxiety manifests itself in all sorts of destructive ways.

Mike Cospers: What I like about this way of thinking is that it challenges all of us when we face the crisis of belief. To see it as a challenge to not only address our pain, as essential as that is, but to address the doubts themselves by seeking truth. This isn't to say that we master our fears and our doubts, particularly on the other side of deep woundedness, but it does mean that there's a kind of faith-filled willingness to look to God, to the scriptures, to the church, and to seek the truth where it may be found, even in the midst of despair.

Here's Ted Olson again.

Ted Olsen: We don't think of it in John Bunyan's time, but there's atheism in Pilgrim's Progress. There's a character named Atheist who is like, mocking those guys like, Oh you're off to the Celestial City or whatever, it doesn't exist, you guys are idiots for trying to get there. And as they talk to Atheist, they find out like, Oh atheist, Hey, listen, I only know that there's no Celestial City because I went looking for it. And he says, I went to go find it further than you've gone. If I hadn't believed in it, I wouldn't have gone looking for it. And he has this whole talk about, I looked and I didn't find it, and now I'm just going back home, and I'm going to entertain myself with the stuff that I threw away when I was,... when I thought there was a city and I said, Oh, this is going to stop me from getting to the city.

And it turns out that Christian is not all that tempted by that atheism at that moment, but he does hit despair and that's what puts him in Doubting Castle in that narrative. And that's what kind of eventually maybe tempts him toward joining Atheist back in Hometown.

Mike Cospers: Christians have been wrestling with deconstruction and doubt from the very beginning. Maybe the most famous example of how to reckon with it comes in the Catholic mystical tradition, particularly from St. John of the Cross's work, *The Dark Night of the Soul*. There, John of the Cross describes the dark night as an experience in which the joys and comforts of spirituality are taken away, and we experience a kind of despair that's like darkness. Wisdom and maturity come when we press on through that darkness in faith, continuing to seek God even in the absence of the comforts we've known before, and discovering something richer and deeper on the other side, something less dependent on those comforts.

I think this is something we could do better with in our communities, helping Christians know that their pain is valid and that darkness is a normal part of the Christian life. That God has a tender heart on those who are struggling, that it's the heart of God, as Jesus revealed, to leave the 99 for the one. When we don't make the space for that kind of struggle, we do a tremendous disservice to the church, leaving people to feel as though their own darkness is a sign that either something's wrong with them or something's wrong with the faith they've invested in. Instead, moments like that should be a time when we invite people to press back into the church, to know that it's a safe place to struggle, to ask real questions, and hopefully to see in that context that there are still reasons to believe.

55 MIN

Ted Olsen: We received our key tip about Ravi Zacharias and that he, not all the details, but that there was certainly some sort of sexual and possibly abusive behavior going on.

We received that tip, and 24 hours later, we got a tip about Bill Hybels, that Bill Hybels was involved in some inappropriate and abusive behavior, sexually abusive behavior, with people who he was in authority over. And those two stories, because both of them were major Christian leaders, they were devastating. I've been at Christianity Today for more than two decades, so I'm used to stories of moral failure and especially of leaders, so surprise is less of a word, but disappointment every time, and sadness every time. And just like it hits you in the gut every time, especially when you hear victim stories, as I'm sure that's been the case with this podcast for you, Mike. Those were bad, but then those started for me an unbroken month where every day I would come into work and there would be an additional story of pastors' moral failure, or some Christian leader's moral failure. Sometimes it was connected to the Zacharias story or the Hybels story, but every day, most of my day had to be taken up with these stories. And at the end of the month, I was just coming, I was praying every day. I'm like, God, I need a break, I needed to go a day without these stories. But it kind of sent me to a place - despair is too strong a word. But I didn't lose my faith in God, but I definitely started to lose my faith in... The real question for me was, Are there any Christians? Are there real Christians? Are there Christians who actually believe this stuff? I know I believe this stuff, but are there Christians, are there other Christians who believe this stuff and act on it, or is this whole... Or are most people doing this as just either as a grift or because they've been grifted? And that was a hard place to come out of, and I came out of it... Community mattered a lot, so it started with people in my immediate congregation. So men who were retired and who, because of relationships, I know their stories, I know their faults and failings, and I could see them. And like, Those dudes, they're real Christians. Like, I know that those guys... Like, okay, let me identify these two guys, at least these guys are real Christians. And then that kind of opened the door for me to be like, Okay. And I know my wife's a real Christian. And I was slowly coming back to realizing, Yeah, okay, there is a community here. There are definitely people in the church who are being abusive, there are people in here to deceive folks, there are people in here who have been deceived and who are still leading. And then there are people who just, they're serving faithfully and they're broken people. Man, they're broken people, but they're real Christians.

Mike Cospers: Thanks to Josh Harris for making time to come talk to me.

Josh, I'd be remiss if I didn't say it one more time, even though I said it to you in person: I just don't get the sense that Jesus is done with you yet. Thanks for coming on the show.

Meanwhile, we've got plenty of Mars Hill's story to tell, but we're taking next week off to continue our reporting. So in the meantime, check out some of our other podcasts from CT: *Viral Jesus* with Heather Thompson Day. *Steadfast* with Sandra McCracken. Or you might check out my other podcast, *Cultivated*, *Conversations About Faith and Work*. It's on hiatus at the moment, but fans of this show might enjoy conversations in the archives with people like Makoto Fujimura, Steve Taylor, Beth Moore, Bret Lott, Lecrae, and many more.

If you like the show, please leave us a rating and 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 continue doing this work, consider joining today at Orderct.com/MarsHill. There's a special deal available to our listeners.

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 Cosper. Joy Beth Smith is our associate producer. Music and sound design for this episode is by Kate Siefker and Mike Cosper, and this episode was mixed also by me.

Our theme song is Sticks and Stones by Kings Kaleidoscope. The closing song this week is Spirit (Keep On) by Jeremy Casella. Graphic designed by Bryan Todd, social media by Nicole Shanks, editorial consulting by our online managing editor Andrea Palpant Dilley. CT's editor in chief is Timothy Dalrymple.

Thanks for listening. We'll see you in a couple of weeks.