

THE
RISE & FALL
OF MARS HILL

EPISODE
BONUS
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BONUS EPISODE

Questioning the Origin Myth: A Rise and Fall

Mark Driscoll's calling to ministry was a fixture in the storytelling that shaped Mars Hill Church. But what's the origin of the origin story?

SHOW NOTES

There's a profound power to storytelling. In all kinds of communities, the stories we tell about who we are and where we came from are life-shaping.

At Mars Hill, one of the oft-told stories was about Mark Driscoll's origin and calling. It began with the gift of a Bible from his future wife. That was the catalyst to faith, and a walk in the woods a few months later led to an experience of hearing God's audible voice saying, "Marry Grace, plant Mars Hill, preach the Bible, and train men."

That story was repeated countless times at Mars Hill, lending Driscoll a sense of both au-

thority and purpose and inviting the church to get caught up in that mission with him.

This shorter episode dives deeper into this “founding myth” of Mars Hill, and how it evolved over time. It also explores the formative, almost liturgical effect it had on the church, and raises the question of how it might have contributed to a fragile architecture at the heart of the church.

MASTHEAD

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

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Mike Cospers: Hey folks, we'll have a new episode coming shortly. But part of the reality of this podcast has been that production's been dynamic. Things change day to day, as we're trying to assimilate voices and perspectives, and the priority for us is to be as faithful as we can in telling the story and honoring those who live through it.

So we're running behind, again. But we have a little side story, in the meantime. It's an odd piece of the Mars Hill puzzle that, honestly, we haven't quite known where to place in the podcast. So we thought we'd release it as a standalone short story, and we think it sets up the remaining episodes pretty well, because it's a pretty important piece of the puzzle. So thanks for your patience, and know that Episode 8 is just around the corner.

If you'd dropped into Mars Hill Church in 2010 and asked almost anyone, how did a guy like Mark Driscoll become a pastor, there's a good chance they could have told you almost verbatim the story that Mark himself would have told you if you'd asked him.

🐦 @PastorMark

Mark Driscoll: I was called into ministry through a prophetic word. I was praying and God spoke to me. He said, Plant churches, study the Bible, marry Grace, train young men. I had a guy recently say, How do you know that was the Lord? What the... Study your Bible, marry the pastor's daughter, train young men and start churches? Like, where do you think that came from? If it was, Sleep with another pastor's wife and preach the Bhagavad Gita, and start mosques, and train rottweilers, well, maybe that would be Satan. But it wasn't that. It was like, I don't think Satan wants people doing, like, intense Bible teaching. I just don't see that.

Mike Cospers: You've heard this origin story before, along with the story of how Mark came to faith, which he usually told just before it. Here's a version of that story from 2007.

Mark Driscoll: And then I was sitting in my dorm reading the Bible that this lovely gal had given me. At this point she was my girlfriend and we were 300-400 miles apart going to different colleges. And up until this point, to be honest with you, I had really no interest in Jesus and no interest in the Bible, but she had given me this very nice Bible with my name stamped on the front. And so I began reading it and I remember sitting on my bed in my dormitory, reading Romans 1, that says, And you are called from among those to belong to Jesus Christ. And I remember the Spirit of God absolutely flipping a switch in me, and I believe that is when God regenerated me. If you're an Armenian, that's when I gave my life to the Lord, if you're a Calvinist, that's when I was saved by God.

Mike Cospers: Back in Episode 2, we talked a bit about founders myths, and how organizations often tell mythological versions of their origin stories in order to establish some big idea about their brand or about the founder themselves. Jerry Davis, a professor of Management and Sociology at the University of Michigan, has written about this idea. And as we'd said on that episode, it finds its roots in the work of Ayn Rand, particularly Atlas shrugged. In Rand's version, these founders build and sustain our world, but they're constantly beset by lesser, weaker figures who get in the way.

Davis notes that Silicon Valley loves Ayn Rand. She's been referenced by Elon Musk, Brian Armstrong, and even Steve Jobs. And at the heart of Silicon Valley is one of the most iconic origin stories of all. It began in 1938 in a garage on a quiet residential street in Palo

Alto. There Bill Hewlett and David Packard developed the company that would become HP, and the garage is recognized on the National Registry of Historic Places as the birthplace of Silicon Valley.

Ever since, the idea of the garage has become part of the iconography of the valley. Other Silicon Valley garages include Apple in 1976, and Google in 1998. A share in the garage mythology is a share in the founder's myth. Born mortal men, these founders enter the garage with an idea and they leave titans, ready to change the world.

The trouble is these stories are almost never quite true. When Google set up shop in a garage in Menlo Park, the company was already two years old and had millions of dollars in startup funds. Steve Jobs' founding partner, Steve Wozniak, has called Apple's garage story mostly untrue, noting that all of the design and building happened somewhere else. Even the hallowed HP garage has an asterisk, Hewlett and Packard did build their first devices there, but the design and prototyping all happened at nearby state of the art labs, including one at Stanford.

The myth develops and persists because it resonates with something in us that loves mavericks, scrappy heroes, upstarts. We love the sense that someone is following a bold dream or a divine inspiration. What can be less inspiring is the complex and messy truth.

5 MIN

Mark Driscoll: In reading the New Testament in college - actually in the Bible that's sitting next to me from a woman that had given it to me, she's now my wife, we've been married eight years and have two kids - came to the realization that the majority of the New Testament, particularly Paul's writings, I thought was complete nonsense.

Mike Cospers: This is from the Dick Staub Show in the year 2000, four years into planting Mars Hill. Rather than opening his Bible one night and being knocked over by the book of Romans, he tells a story of conversion that took place over time, where the biggest influence wasn't Paul, but Augustine's confessions, which he read as an assignment for a class.

There are other interesting discrepancies in this interview. He describes himself growing up as a good kid, well behaved, determined, and studious, and he mentions being president of his high school class. It's far from the origin story we hear later of the street brawler who grew up with bullets whizzing by his head. The story takes yet another surprising turn a little later when Staub asks him about his vision for church planting.



Dick Staub: So now you decide to follow Jesus. How do you end up pastoring a church and even starting a church?

Mark Driscoll: Through a conversation with a homosexual friend, which was an interesting twist in the story. There was one guy who was the most zealous, bizarre t-shirt, bumper sticker, nut job Christian possible, and he felt like it was his job to bring me to Jesus.

Dick Staub: Yeah.

Mark Driscoll: And not just any old Jesus, but the Jesus he had a picture of, which I'm still not convinced was a good picture. But he was an in the closet homosexual, who

was also a practicing youth pastor. And so we were talking one night and he said, Well, what are you gonna study in college? I said, Well, I'm gonna study speech so I can be a preacher. He said, Why is that? So I said, I read in the Bible about that guy named Paul, he seemed like he was pretty courageous and started churches, and I know I'm gonna end up doing that. And he said, Well, you don't even go to church. I said, I know.

Dick Staub: Yeah.

Mark Driscoll: That'll all get worked out somehow. I know I'm just... I'm kind of stuck with this.

Dick Staub: Yeah.

Mark Driscoll: I'm gonna have to be. And so he and I had a long conversation and out of that, I started a Bible study that week, and I got a bunch of guys together. I said, I'm gonna be your teacher and you can ask me any question you want, but I can't tell you the answer until next week, because I have no idea what the answers are.

Mike Cosper: There's no voice of God in this version of the story, no grand vision. Maybe that all happened and he wasn't ready to talk about it yet. Or maybe, as often happens, the stories we tell are about making sense of where we are, not actually about how we got there. It's less compelling to talk about stumbling into ministry than it is to talk about hearing God like a prophet in the wilderness.

You can go back a little further and see yet another version of the Driscoll story in the Washington State University paper, the *Evergreen*. Driscoll had a column for them called *On The Mark*, in which he regularly invoked the ire of his fellow students with conservative and fundamentalist takes on religion, politics and student life. It's all still online in their archives. In a column from October, 1992, titled *The Makings of a Lunatic*, Driscoll described his conversion to Christianity in some detail, referring to a resident in the same hall as him as the most rabid Bible thumper ever.

It was arguments with this friend that led him to start studying the Bible and other Christian books, just hoping to prove this guy wrong. He failed though. My life was at a crossroads, he wrote, I was stuck between two options. The first consisted in continuing in my old ways in rejecting the truth that I'd found, the other was a frightening alternative, dying in a very real way to the Lordship of Christ.

With Staub's interview, he tells the story of becoming a pastor without hearing the audible voice of God. In this column, he tells the story of becoming a Christian without Grace Driscoll, and without even the Bible that he so often referenced in his other stories. It's an argument from silence to say that the Bible wasn't there or that she played no role in all of this, but you'd also think she might have been on his mind. This was October '92. They'd gotten married just two months earlier in August.

There's one other kind of funny wrinkle in this storytelling. Small enough, it almost seems like nitpicking, but it came up on Mark's Instagram on March 21st of this year, when he posted a picture of himself holding a thread-bare black Bible. He wrote, Some

30 years ago, my beautiful girlfriend and eventual wife gave me this Bible. It was yet another callback to his origin story as a pastor. The only trouble is the Bible in the picture, worn out as it may be, is an English Standard Version, a translation that was first published in 2001, more than a decade after Grace gave him his first Bible. That caption was later edited.

So you have this story that takes shape over time, a meta narrative for Mark's ministry. And during the Mars Hill years, a meta narrative for the church itself. It's like the evolution of the church's branding. It got focused, tighter, simpler. The previous iterations of the church's story involved a diverse cast of characters, co-founders, the generosity of other churches and Mark's college friends. It's messy. There's not just one hero. And some of those people are gone now. The later narrative is streamlined into something that actually places Driscoll at the center of the story: God's man to plant Mars Hill and start a movement of training men and planting churches. Consider how differently two churches are gonna look if they're framed by those two different stories. In the one, the church is a communal effort. People are gonna come and go and the church doesn't belong to one person or one personality. With the other story, though, there's an almost apostolic amount of authority in the hands of the person who's hearing directly from God. It gives the church a sense of manifest destiny that God is using this person and this city and this time to accomplish great things. And that's all language you'd hear around Driscoll at the height of his ministry. To be a member meant that you got to take part in all of those adventures.

And if you have any doubts about how critical that story was in the life of the church, consider again how often it was told. At a minimum, based on transcripts, every three or four months for 10 years. In members' classes too, and special talks and lectures. At Acts 29 events, at Real Marriage events, and in the opening pages of Real Marriage.

Mark Driscoll: He said, Plant churches, study the Bible, marry Grace, train young men.

And what God said was, Preach, marry Grace - my now lovely wife, preach the Bible, train men, and plant a church that plants other churches.

He said, marry Grace, plant churches, train men, and preach the Bible.

God spoke to me and told me to preach the Bible, train men, plant churches and marry Grace.

He said to marry Grace, plant churches, preach the Bible, train men.

Mike Cosper: Years ago, I heard Ron and Debra Rienstra tell a story about a kid who went up to his pastor after a service. The kid asked, How come every week, when you finish reading the Bible, you say the grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of the Lord endures forever. The pastor smiled and said, That's why, that's exactly why. Point being, the liturgy of the church had given the kid the language of faith. By repeating that affirmation week after week after week in the church service, he now had a reference point in his memory for how to think about the scriptures.

And much of the history of Christian worship is premised on this idea, that the church gathers to rehearse the truths of the gospel and a vision of the kingdom of God by repeating the words of the liturgy, praying the Lord's Prayer, celebrating at the table, singing Psalms and hymns. It's by virtue of that repetition that the work of the gathered church stays with us, and when a moment of hardship strikes and our own words fail, these words are at the ready.

In her book, *Prayer in the Night*, Tish Harrison Warren tells the story of miscarrying and hemorrhaging in 2017. It was a moment of desperation in which she turned to her husband and asked him to pray compline with her, one of the liturgies of evening prayers of the church. She writes, The sweep of church history exclaims *lex orandi, lex credendi*, that the law of prayer is the law of belief. We come to God with our little belief, however fleeting and feeble, and in prayer we're taught to walk more deeply into truth. When my strength waned and my words ran dry, I needed to fall into a way of belief that carried me. I needed other people's prayers.

The prayers of compline or the communion liturgy or the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles Creed, as well as much of the music of the church, connects a Christian not only with the body of Christ around them, but with the global church who shares those words throughout time and space.

I want to consider the Mars Hill origin story as part of that church's liturgy. It's a statement of identity that roots the church in the calling of its pastor, a calling that comes through charismatic means. It's attractive because there's always something attractive about a, quote, unquote visionary leader. You can go all the way back to 1st Samuel to see that. It's also attractive because in a secularized age where spirituality seems difficult and contested, having someone stand before us with certainty that they've heard from God in a unique way, and that they know His plan for our life, is comforting. But it's also a liturgy that narrows the church rather than widens it, setting Mars Hill up in competition with other churches in its city. Add to that the fact that the story, by all appearances, was manufactured, tailored, molded into something more memorable, marketable, and effective at mobilizing the church. In the end, this origin story was one of many competing for the hearts of the members of Mars Hill, and it seems that those who believed it most deeply were also the ones wounded most deeply.

So it's worth taking an inventory and asking what stories are moving us. Do those stories expand our vision of Christ's church, or narrow it? For pastors, then, what stories are you telling? What's the vision that you are inviting your church into? Jared Wilson often says, What you win them with is what you win them to. In other words, whatever's drawing the crowd, whether it's charisma or as Bart Simpson once described the church, Lights, smoke and tae-bo, that tends to form the foundation of their faith. In this case, if you've won them to a sense of one man's charismatic calling and vision, then when that starts to crumble, the consequences, as the Mars Hill consequences were, can be tragic.

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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 and sound design by Kate Siefker and Mike Cospers. This episode was mixed by Mike Cospers. Our theme song is Sticks and Stones by Kings

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