



# Red Sky at Morning

Oversized ambitions at morning; pastors, take warning.

## SHOW NOTES

As success grew at Mars Hill, Mark Driscoll's ministry dreams expanded. With the advent of the multisite church and advances in technology, a leader could move beyond the mundanity of local place and community to spread his message far afield, fulfilling his own great commission literally to the ends of the earth. With a talented team and generous budget at his fingertips, Mark dreamed big. Fifty thousand church members. A New York Times bestseller. The most prominent media distribution channel on the internet.

But when you undermine the foundations of a church, you shouldn't be surprised when the building comes tumbling down around you. When technology removes the limits to access, you shouldn't be surprised when it also sings the alluring call of worldly success. When you call others to deep sacrifice for your own ambitions, you begin to count the bodies under the bus.

In this episode of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, host Mike Cospers explores Mars Hill's "mission accomplished" cultural moment when Mark shifted his gaze from Seattle to cities and success benchmarks beyond. With incisive journalism and compassionate engagement, Cospers paints the picture of a wounded church—sheep dispersed and isolated by technology, expendable to the mission of a shepherd gone wayward. And he asks us to consider whether our adoption of gospel-amplifying tactics has clouded our vision of its good, true, and beautiful message.

## MASTHEAD

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

Executive Producer: Erik Petrik

Producer, Writer, Editor, and Host: Mike Cospers

Additional Editing: Resonate Recordings and Matt Linder

Associate Producer: Joy Beth Smith

Music, Sound Design, and Mix Engineer: Kate Siefker

Graphic Design: Bryan Todd

Social Media: Nicole Shanks

Editorial Consultant: Andrea Palpant Dilley

Editor in Chief: Timothy Dalrymple

Theme song: “Sticks and Stones” by Kings Kaleidoscope

Closing song: “The Bridge” by Taylor Leonhardt

---

Transcription: Cheryl Penner

Transcript Design: Alecia Sharp

## TRANSCRIPT

@MikeCospers

@jessebryan

@MikeAndersonSD

**Jesse Bryan:** Here, I got a fun story for you.

**Mike Cospers:** This is Jesse Bryan, longtime creative director from Mars Hill.

**Jesse Bryan:** Will you please tell Mike the first time you met Tim?

**Mike Anderson:** So we're in one of the hotels at some big conference, and I think it was a Desiring God conference, because I remember I was having drinks with, Barnabas Piper. Actually, John Piper was there in the bar, but not drinking.

**Mike Cospers:** This is Mike Anderson. This would've been sometime around 2008 and he would've been about 23, and he'd just taken over at the helm of The Resurgence, Mars Hill's resourcing ministry, which at the time was a barely used blogging website.

**Mike Anderson:** And take the escalator downstairs and I'm like, Oh my gosh, it's Tim Keller. And for me, this is like superhero, or like seeing one of your favorite football players. And I introduce myself, I reach out. And he's a huge guy. I had no idea how big he was. I go to shake his hand, Hey, I'm Mike Anderson, director of The Resurgence. He takes that big hand like this and he hits me square in the chest, like hard, and he says, Son, The Resurgence will not be directed.

**Jesse Bryan:** There you go. That's all you need to know about Tim Keller. He didn't play around. I'll tell you what, man, Tim Keller was nothing but a nice dude. I don't know. I always really liked him.

**Mike Anderson:** Yeah.

**Jesse Bryan:** Same with Piper. Piper was super cool too.

**Mike Cospers:** There's more to this than just a funny anecdote because it wouldn't be long before The Resurgence would be a lot more than a punchline. Mike had been brought on board with a very clear mandate for where he was supposed to take it.

**Mike Anderson:** I get hired and Mark takes me to a baseball game the very first day, and he basically said, Hey, our media team's good, the rest of my leadership team is junior varsity and we're getting ready to become varsity, and I need you to come in and figure out how to build our distribution, because we're gonna be... We're taking this national, we're taking this worldwide, was basically the idea. And he's like, I need you to take what you know how to do with these new social networks, and I need you to figure out how to build the distribution for us to get this message out to the world. And I was stoked about that.

**Mike Cospers:** Mike Anderson's work in building The Resurgence is one of the final elements of the Mars Hill story that needs to be put in place.

The Resurgence was originally launched in 2006, the same year that they opened their first video venue multi-site campus in Shoreline, and about a year before the governance transition that concentrated authority in a small executive team. What they saw

in Mike was a young, true believer with an entrepreneurial gift. The kind of leader that Mars Hill seemed to find regularly. He was fully committed to the vision of the church and willing to bleed for it, which he did. Jesse and the media team may have had Shredder's Lair, with skateboard ramps and hundred thousand dollar cameras. Mike Anderson did not.

**Mike Anderson:** The budget policy for me was eat what you kill. And so I had to bring in the money. So what I was doing is I was calling up publishers, I was calling up conferences. I was sleeping on the floor of different people's hotel rooms so that I could travel the country and go get... Make Resurgence a thing. And so I would go do whatever it took to earn enough money to go to this event or that event, and I would bring a little camera with me and I'd try to record whoever I could get in front of. That's how The Resurgence became what it became, was me traveling around and doing whatever I could to get clips or to get access to blog posts, all that sort of thing. And then again, I built a volunteer team that grew like crazy, and we built a machine to turn that into blog posts and podcasts and all that sort of thing.

**Jesse Bryan:** Mike built The Resurgence with volunteers that he trained from the church. Think about that. One salary built the largest Christian blog on the internet with interns. Here's how good that internship program is. If you figured out - and we're not gonna talk about who they were - who those interns were in that group, most of them have incredible careers because of the stuff they learned there.

**Mike Cosper:** That reticence to name names is something we'll get into more in a later episode, but I've confirmed it. And as for this story, the launch of The Resurgence, I remember those days. I remember first meeting Mike Anderson when I was writing for the Gospel Coalition and attending conferences and events around that time. Mike would be around wearing this huge black backpack, because unbeknownst to me, literally everything he was traveling with was packed inside. I remember someone asking around for a room for him one time, that he could crash in. And I thought it was a joke, but it turns out he wasn't. It was the scrappy way this website was put together. And the sweat that he poured into that work paid off over time.

Eventually The Resurgence became the kind of place that Christian writers of all sorts wanted to publish their stuff. And it was a wildly diverse mix. Scholars like Timothy George, D.A. Carson, and Michael Horton, along with megachurch pastors like Perry Noble, Craig Groeschel. Musicians like Jackie Hill Perry, all kinds of Acts 29 pastors, the aforementioned Tim Keller. And full disclosure, I published an article there as well.

5 MIN

**Mike Anderson:** So we were going out with The Resurgence. We were inviting people to write, but we decided what they were gonna write about. We were trying to shift the whole perspective on how all this stuff worked, and they were happy to do it because we had a vision and they didn't.

**Jesse Bryan:** So brand implies value. So if you can take someone with a strong brand and you can stand next to them, it's called selling by association. So every time Mike could get, I don't know, Grudem or whoever, to write a blog post, they thought they were winning because they were getting distribution. We were stacking the deck. It

was like, look at all these all stars. And we're bringing in people from different tribes because we weren't a part of any of them. So it wasn't like we cared about the Baptists were doing, or the whatevers were doing, we weren't part of a denomination. So it was like, Great, let's just go get all the best people from all these other places and get them on the platform. And then the more that Mike did that, the traffic just started going faster and faster.

**Mike Cospers:** The success of The Resurgence eventually allowed it to expand well beyond the blog. It was a publishing imprint and a training center, featuring classes taught by well-respected conservative, evangelical scholars. That coincided with several other factors to define what I'd call the third act in the life of the church.

Act one was the church living on a shoestring, unsure how they'd pay rent, unsure of who they were or what they were ultimately gonna be about. It was the formative period where Mars Hill found an identity and a sense of trajectory.

Act two started maybe 2001 or 2002. During that period, the church became an established Seattle based megachurch, and Driscoll became a leader of the Young, Restless, Reformed movement, seen as a protege of pastors like John Piper and C.J. Mahaney, even if that didn't reflect reality. The stage was getting set for the third act around this time, with the launch of The Resurgence, the governance changes of 2007, and the launch of video venue multisites in 2006.

These strategies, along with the growing awareness of Driscoll as a pastor celebrity, allowed for an ever-expanding sense of horizon for the church's future. It stretched the imagination for what Mars Hill and Driscoll could achieve. But it's also the final stage in the story because pursuing those ambitions came with a willingness to jettison a lot of the past, commitments to place and to people, to values and identity.

It would take a while for those shifts to fully come to the surface, for them to be fully realized in the minds of the leaders that they would affect. But as everyone at Mars Hill would eventually find out, when you undermine your own foundations, you shouldn't be surprised when the thing you've built starts crumbling around you.

**Mike Cospers:** From Christianity Today, this is Mike Cospers and you are 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 the story about the mystery of God working in broken places today. Today's show, Episode 10, Red Sky at Morning.

Let's talk for a second about multi-site churches. Using the most basic definition, a multi-site is a church with a shared centralized set of leaders, values, doctrine and identity that meets in multiple locations. Some versions have live preaching at each location, some only have live teaching at one, and video everywhere else. Really though, there's a million ways to do it, and a million books written on how to do it. And a lot of those books were written by Warren Bird. I asked him to walk me through the origins of the phenomenon.

**Warren Bird:** I bet most listeners' assumption is that I'm gonna say something in the U.S. because we kind of think the world revolves around us, and it doesn't. God is often way ahead of what happens in the United States overseas. And in this case, the mega-church movement had taken off in Korea and Yonggi Cho at Yoido Church had... He would speak to the sanctuary, but he would have a bank of television monitors that were like overflow rooms that in and of themselves were kind of like congregations. And so all these pilgrimage people from the United States who went and saw this, what became the largest attendance church in the world, saw here is a way to have a church in more than one location using video, and it works.

**Mike Cospers:** It's hard to say exactly who did it first in the U.S., because the definition is so fluid, but one of the earliest pioneers was Larry Osborne in Vista, California.

**Warren Bird:** Worship was in a strip mall type building, so you had the firewalls on the side. So you couldn't bump out or back, you had to use - and you can only cycle that space so much - so he thought, Well, why not just pipe the service into another one of these units that's two doors down - and maybe Mike's Oil and Lube was in between - but there was kind of an area that became the church area. And as part of it, the innovation for Larry was, besides the video, Let's have a different style for each location. So the nostalgia group that doesn't like the loud music, let's give them the piano and make it largely piano, and then pipe in the the sermon. So it was a lot of experimentation by constraint. Then the idea of, Well, if we can do this 50 feet away and 500 feet away, why couldn't we do this five miles away and then later on 50 miles or 500 miles away.

**Mike Cospers:** Once the idea got ahold of the imaginations of pastors in the U.S., it expanded quickly and churches began pursuing all kinds of baling wire and duct tape solutions to make it work for them.

**Warren Bird:** Joel Hunter's church, just outside of Orlando. They had a guy who worked for MCI and he was pioneering... MCI at the time was pioneering with video technology. And every week they ran this wire from where they met, across the fence, to the other side to a school. And if somebody had clipped or run over that wire, that would be the end of the worship service. But there were all kinds of experimenters, is what I'm saying.

**Mike Cospers:** There's an interesting lens we can frame all of this in, if we strip the whole idea of multisite and video venue down to its bones. How has the church allowed technology to reshape its ministry before, even its ecclesiology and its worship? What happens when technology enables you to take something that would otherwise be limited and localized, bound by time and space and by how many people you could fit in one room, and opened it up, removed the limits? In the case of video teaching, you're taking something you believe is a unique, exemplary kind of gifting - this pastor's preaching ability, as well as the resources for research and communications that are only available to larger institutions - and you're taking it beyond the limits of the number of church services he or she can manage to preach through, and how big a building you can build. Now you can send it far and wide. So not only do you get what you think is a better resource in the hands of more people, you also free the local pastors from the labor of preparing their own sermons, freeing them up to focus on other pastoral

responsibilities. They get a quality of teaching, resourcing and media that they'd never gotten before.

And there's another moment in church history where technology changed the worshipping life of the church in a similar way.

 @winfieldbevins

**Winfield Bevins:** There is some interesting parallel of how do we replicate something that seems to be working? How do you take what's happening in the movement and how do you replicate that regionally in regional hubs?

**Mike Cosper:** This is Winfield Bevins. He's the Director of Church Planting at Asbury Seminary, and is the author of several books, including *Simply Anglican*, and *Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Allure of Liturgy for a New Generation*.

**Winfield Bevins:** So imagine a prayer book that is designed for both corporate worship and private, personal worship, and not just private, but also family worship. This made the scriptures and worship accessible for the people in England during that time period.

**Mike Cosper:** He's talking about the Book of Common Prayer, first written and published in 1549 by Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

**Winfield Bevins:** It's the second most significant religious book in the English speaking language, second only to the King James Bible in terms of its impact. A quote that I love to kind of help explain to people, J.I. Packer said that, Long before the age of fish and chips, the Book of Common Prayer was the great British invention. And one of the things that it does is it does exactly that. It's common prayer, it brings people together.

**Mike Cosper:** Cranmer was some kind of genius. And the book is in many way kind of a greatest hits of the church's worshipping life, both in the great tradition of the church, stretching back for centuries, and in the emerging liturgies of the reformation in the day. What Cranmer brought to the table though, was his ability to synthesize it, and to translate it into English from the Latin, or in the case of some of the resources he incorporated from reformed liturgies, whatever their original language was. The printing press with movable type had come into being just a century before this, and in terms of cultural history was relatively new at the time. So the ability to then print the prayer book en masse revolutionized worship in the English speaking world.

15 MIN

**Winfield Bevins:** Imagine if you had only heard worship in Latin and you had never experienced a worship service in your own heart language. And so there were riots. A lot of people really did not want prayer in their own language. They had never... It seemed sacrilegious.

**Mike Cosper:** Driscoll made historical comparisons as well in his defense of multi-site. He made his most direct appeal by referencing the horseback Methodist circuit rider ministries.

 @PastorMark

**Mark Driscoll:** We have, instead of a horse, you have a screen, if you're doing video preaching. In early Methodism, I'll give you one example. Francis Asbury, who was the

founding Bishop of American Methodism, he traveled a quarter million miles estimated on foot and horseback, preached 16,000 sermons. That's multi-campus under a senior leader whose primary preacher functioning in an apostolic way. Not an apostle, like the New Testament authors, but apostolic in that they have leadership influence over multiple churches, whereas a pastor has leadership influence over a church.

**Mike Cospers:** He also mentions the printing press, but then he goes on to talk about loudspeakers, radio, and television, and how they gave Billy Graham a reach for the gospel that was unimaginable a century before. He then describes a pretty dramatic vision for what multi-site could look like in just a few years.

**Mark Driscoll:** I believe it is probable that you'll have churches in the millions. I don't think it's impossible to have a church of a million people. It happens in other nations and in other places, but I think technology and the number of screens in America has made it possible to have churches of that kind of scope and reach. Now to be sure, not a lot and certainly not mine, because if you've listened to me, you know I'm not mass marketable. I hit a very sort of drunken redneck, indie rocker, good sense of humor, niche. But there will be someone who is able to speak to a mass audience with broad appeal, and there will be many more. More screens in churches than theaters. Just think about that on your way home.

**Mike Cospers:** When he turns his attention to the internet, you see a glimpse of what Mars Hill's reach looked like in 2008. And I think between these comments and the comments about screens, there's a sketch of a roadmap for where the church would go in the next six years.

**Mark Driscoll:** Today, what we are finding, I'll preach a sermon on Sunday... Like in our Religion Safe series a while back, I preach a sermon on a Sunday, we'd send it out to iTunes and Facebook and MySpace and YouTube, and we'd put it on our main website and our media portal. Let's say on a Sunday I'd preach to, I don't know, a certain number of people. That week, either in full or in part, the sermon would be downloaded, listened to, or viewed - audio and video format - upwards of a hundred thousand times. You think about the multiplication of the message through the internet. That's unbelievable. So if there's a Sunday and there's 6,000 people I preach to, it goes on the internet, hits another hundred thousand people that week, and it lives forever.

**Mike Cospers:** We've talked a lot in several episodes now about the role of media in the life of Mars Hill, but the story demands that we keep coming back to it because as the years went by, most of the church only knew Driscoll through these mediated experiences, either online or in pre-recorded and sometimes edited sermons. It's kind of stunning to look at the pace at which technology evolved in the 18 years of Mars Hill's life. In terms of the ability to capture and project sermons week to week, which allowed the multi-site expansion, and the development of high speed internet, streaming technology, and smartphones, enabling Mars Hill to connect with an audience that was much broader than previously possible. The evolution of media is central to this story because it was central to this cultural moment.

Here's Nick Bogardus, who was Mars Hill's PR and Media Relations Director, and was



later the lead pastor at the Orange County campus. His time at Mars Hill led to a lot of reflection on the formative role of media in the spiritual life of the church.

**Nick Bogardus:** There's a whole field of study called media ecology that I got into. Most people know Neil Postman, Marshall McLuhan. And so the argument that field makes is that when technology is introduced into an environment, it's rarely neutral. A tool can sometimes be neutral in its usages, but it always impacts the environment. And so you can't overestimate the power that it has to form, and the problem is that often we don't notice it, or we assume its benefit without asking the hard questions about how it's shaping us in return. So if you think about television, people have talked about how the introduction of television to politics absolutely changed the landscape, going back to the Nixon/Kennedy Debate. That while people who listened to the debate thought that Nixon won, people who watched the debate felt like Kennedy won because he looked handsome and composed the whole time and Nixon was sweating and looked all disheveled. Just the medium changed people's perception of the event.

**Mike Cospers:** How does a projected larger than life image of a preacher change our perception of the sermon, or the pastor, or the entire worship experience? Maybe we're so inundated with life on screens that we hardly notice, and yet maybe that's the very source of the problem - we're desensitized to them. So then this medium through which we consume entertainment of all kinds, becomes the vehicle through which we hear the word of God. What are the subtle embedded messages that come through the very presence of the screen though? It's a question Nick began to ask over time. And when he resigned from Mars Hill, he raised these questions with the executive elders in a letter.

**Nick Bogardus:** What I said was like, Hey, I grew up Lutheran, and when I walk into a Lutheran church, I see an aisle down to the front, and at the front of that aisle is with a cross over it, I see an elevated pulpit. I see high ceilings and stained glass, and I see things that are communicating theological realities that form their disciples in return. That elevated pulpit is meant to communicate a high view of God and the authority of His word. The high ceilings are meant to convey his transcendence, and the stained glass is meant to convey his beauty. Like, all those things end up shaping how you view God. And what I wrote in the letter was, When I walk into a Mars Hill campus and see a 60-foot screen with a disembodied messenger and an audience, rather than a congregation, the questions I raised were, How is this forming disciples? Is it forming just consumers, or is it forming people who have a robust faith?

**Mike Cospers:** There's a related challenge that comes with multisite, something Warren Bird talked about as well. It's another issue that emerges because of the teacher's absence from the people being taught.


**Warren Bird:** Pastors would just as a normal part of their sermon before they went multisite would talk about the traffic coming down such a road, or the weather today, or the local sports team, or the rivalry between the two local high schools. And they quickly realized, this really doesn't translate when I'm at the other campus, I just have to learn to still be just as pastoral and speak to the needs of the human heart, but make sure my illustrations are not location or time specific in a way that causes people to go, Huh?

**Mike Cospers:** Maybe there are churches and situations where the teaching can be divorced from that kind of context without losing much of its essence or potency. But Mars Hill was built on that kind of particularity, an emphasis on context. It was a church for Seattle, for the most unchurched city in America, where there were more dogs than children. It wasn't supposed to make sense in other places. You could maintain some of that context as the church planted campuses around the city. But just a year after this multi-site conference in 2009, Mars Hill would adopt a church in Albuquerque, New Mexico, called City on a Hill, and would eventually launch sites in California and Oregon. Those were just the first in a far more ambitious plan that had been forming in Driscoll's mind, and it was something that Driscoll wasn't really all that shy about. Here's Jeff Vanderstelt, who during this time was pastoring an Acts 29 church called Soma in Tacoma, Washington, and was part of the Acts 29 board.

 @JeffVanderstelt

**Jeff Vanderstelt:** There was a shift, and I remember Mark had a conversation with Tim, and I think Rick Warren or somebody had prayed for the inauguration of the president. And I remember him saying, Man I want to be there, I want to be that guy. And him saying, I know that I'm gonna have to have the biggest church in the country to make that happen, and so I'm aiming for 50,000. And that was when the shift happened where he said, Yeah, I'm just gonna find out where we have a listening audience of at least a thousand people, and that's where we'll put up a campus and eventually we'll have 50 of those and we'll have the biggest church in the country, and then I'll be that guy.

**Mike Cospers:** In an earlier act in the life of Mars Hill, you'd often hear Driscoll offer brutal criticism of any ministry strategy that prided itself in growth in numbers. But by 2010, when this multi-site vision was underway and a roadmap to 50,000 people was being assembled, he was unapologetic about it. You might even say he was aggressive about it.

 @jamesmacdonald

**James MacDonald:** So Hey, Mark, how many sites at your church?

**Mike Cospers:** This is James MacDonald from a video produced by the Gospel Coalition in 2010. He was still the pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel in Chicago at the time.

**Mark Driscoll:** 10, hoping to open 11 this summer.

**James MacDonald:** Great. And how many services?

**Mark Driscoll:** 24-ish.

**Mike Cospers:** With them in the video is Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC.

**James MacDonald:** Yeah, we got five sites, going to six. We have 13, going to 15 weekend services, More than 10,000 people in both of our churches, hundreds and hundreds of decisions for Christ every year, praise God, baptized. And here is our brother, mentor, theological genius. When his book on church polity came out, I was like, Are you kidding me? I couldn't write... It would take my whole life to write that. I couldn't even carry it, let alone read it. It's so full. You're, like, smarter than I'll ever be. But you don't have multi-site,



**Mark Dever:** Oh my goodness.

**James MacDonald:** You don't even have multi-services.

**Mark Dever:** Oh, what's going on?

**James MacDonald:** But you certainly could fill more if you had them, with your amazing gift of preaching, and I know people are coming to Christ in your church, you're planting churches. So you've obviously decided differently than we've decided. We'll tell you why we're right in a minute, but you tell us why you're doing it the way you are.

**Mark Dever:** Alright. The word ecclesia in the New Testament means assembly.

**Mark Driscoll:** According to...

**Mark Dever:** The Bible. I think it's lexical use. It means assembly.

**Mark Driscoll:** According to who?

**Mark Dever:** Like in Acts 16... In Acts 18, when there's the riot...

25 MIN

**Mike Cospers:** As you can hear, from right off the bat, it's not really a discussion. It's more like two guys cornering a kid in a hallway, trying to take his lunch money.

**Mark Driscoll:** When you're gone, how many open preaching slots are there a year at your church for other men?

**Mark Dever:** We have a service on Sunday evening, 52 times a year, I never preach there. So I'm always there, I lead the service but I never preach there.

**Mark Driscoll:** 52.

**Mark Dever:** Hold on. And then Sunday morning we have - of the 52 Sundays, I'll preach 26 to 30.

**James MacDonald:** But if you're gone, there's 52 more, so there's 104.

**Mark Driscoll:** So there's one's 75-ish or something.

**Mark Dever:** Yeah.

**Mark Driscoll:** I have 300.

**Mark Dever:** Because of the multi-sites?

**Mark Driscoll:** Right.

**Mark Dever:** Okay.

**Mark Driscoll:** So I have 300.

**Mark Dever:** But what if your video goes to...

**Mark Driscoll:** Congregations from 300 to 4,000, so guys can also break in at their skill level.

**Mark Dever:** But your video stuff is...

**James MacDonald:** That was huge, what he just said.

**Mark Driscoll:** I just beat you. And then you changed the topic.

**Mark Dever:** No, no, no. I asked the same question...

**Mike Casper:** It's hard to imagine the Driscoll of just a few years before picking a fight this aggressively with a well-respected elder statesmen like Dever, but it was a clear sign that something had changed. Dever, for his part, doesn't really engage the debate, and he just asked questions, which seems to get Driscoll and MacDonald into more and more of a feeding frenzy kind of mood. The effect on the audience though, was not what they expected. And when the video went live, commenters immediately started piling on about how absurd the two of them looked.

Here's Collin Hansen from the Gospel Coalition.

 @collinhansen

**Collin Hansen:** When we published that video in 2010, I had just joined the Gospel Coalition. It didn't take long before that video went public and people responded saying, I can't believe that these guys looked so much like fools. It wasn't long before that video was published, that Mark became very sensitive about people's negative reaction to him - and I found this to be a fairly characteristic response from him - began to make threats to me, to make threats about my employment at the Gospel Coalition if I didn't follow through on deleting comments, and helping to make him look good through these things.

But the fact is there wasn't anything I could do to make him look good in that video, nor was it my job to do so.

**Mike Casper:** Despite the negative reaction, it wouldn't be the last time Driscoll and MacDonald would collaborate to make a public stir, and those future efforts wouldn't necessarily go well either. But this moment in 2010 is a significant waypoint in the Mars Hill story, a very clear public statement that for Driscoll an emphasis on the numbers had taken center stage and he was ready to pick fights over it. Frankly, he couldn't understand why anyone would see it any differently.

**James MacDonald:** Baptists always win somehow.

**Mark Driscoll:** We love you, Mark.


**James MacDonald:** We love you.

**Mark Driscoll:** And when you go multisite, we will show up and celebrate your first Sunday.

**James MacDonald:** Yes.

**Mike Cosper:** Just a few months later, there'd be another waypoint; one that many Mars Hill members would look back on as a before and after moment where they too realized the church had changed into something new.

We'll be right back.

 @timgaydos

**Tim Gaydos:** Happy Easter, Mars Hill church.

**Mike Cosper:** It was a rainy Easter Sunday in 2011, and all of the area Mars Hill campuses were gathered at Qwest Field, the Seahawks football stadium.

**Tim Gaydos:** What an opportunity we have to celebrate and worship. This is the first time our Puget Sound campuses have gathered together in over 10 years, and it's amazing to see this beautiful family reunion come together. Even all the crazy uncles here. It is amazing to gather together as one body. To gather here at Qwest Field, which is becoming Mars Hill Church for one day.

**Mike Cosper:** There were several moments during this service that people pointed to as sort of points of interest in the story. One was a new face, at least to Seattle, of one of the worship leaders

 @TimAndSmith

**Tim Smith:** I have some dear friends with me here this morning to help lead us in a song, and I want you to help me welcome, all the way from Orange County, California. He leads a great band called Thrice, and he's going to be a part of our new campus there; Dustin Kensrue.

**Mike Cosper:** Dustin Kensrue's band, Thrice, had been around since 1998 and was well known in the Indian hard rock scene. They'd released records on major labels, like Sub City, Island and Vagrant. So to a certain subset, and definitely a constituency of Mars Hill, he was a big name to have present. He'd eventually join the staff and move from Orange County to Seattle, to serve at the campus in Bellevue where Driscoll preached live.

Another interesting moment came when Justin Forsett, a running back for the Seattle Seahawks, came out to welcome the church to their home stadium.

30 MIN

 @JForsett

**Justin Forsett:** It's my honor and privilege to welcome all you guys to my office space that I call on Sundays, also known as Qwest Field. So thank you for coming out. Now normally, before the start of the game, we will raise the 12 man flag right up there, and we'll celebrate and start the game. But in honor of Resurrection Sunday, and Jesus and who He is, we're gonna raise the Jesus flag this morning. So everybody stand to your feet.

**Mike Cospers:** Looking back 10 years later, people see that day very differently. For some, it's one of the most amazing and powerful moments in their ministry careers. It's a story about the church coming together to pull off a gargantuan effort in the six-week window between the genesis of the idea and the service itself. It's a story about almost 700 baptisms, and a story of more than 17,000 people gathered in one place to celebrate the resurrection.

But for others, it was very different. Even just accounting for the human toll of that six-week turnaround was brutal. It felt like a spur of the moment decision by Driscoll got thrown on the backs of the church to pull off. And it would've been difficult to do with six months, much less six weeks. They got it done. But in spite of all the talk about the day being about the resurrection, some felt it was just a vanity project about Driscoll.

**Mark Driscoll:** And how wonderful is it, that a little Bible study that Grace and I started in our living room 15 years ago, now is this great, glorious evidence of Jesus' resurrection. If Jesus is dead...

**Mike Cospers:** There were also a few who observed a sense of cognitive dissonance, that it was a cold rainy morning, that the stadium was three fourths empty, and yet there was all this energy coming from the stage and the loudspeakers, the presence of celebrities, the hype from Driscoll. It just felt forced and out of step with the Mars Hill that they knew.

**Mark Driscoll:** Now, come on down, give your life to Jesus. Let's get baptized, and throw a big resurrection party. Would you like to sing? Mars Hill, would you like to sing? How about you? Would you like to sing? Jesus rose! Please rise. Pastor Tim, these people wanna sing!

 @jnathanburke

**Nate Burke:** I think the arc peaks probably at Qwest.

**Mike Cospers:** This is Nate Burke, who was Driscoll's executive assistant and essentially his chief of staff.

**Nate Burke:** I had concerns before then, for sure. A lot of us did. Even the fact that we pulled Qwest off with relatively short period of time, and it burned a ton of people out. But I remember being there and thinking, This is gonna go one of two ways. He's gonna either walk out there and feel humbled by this thing that he started in his living room and is gonna be like, Wow, 17,000 people, amazing. Or he's gonna go out there and be like, Conquered. Seattle, check. Did it. And unfortunately it was the latter.

**Mike Cospers:** If there was a feeling of mission accomplished in Seattle, then it made sense that Driscoll would start to redirect his energies beyond the city, but he'd also need a different approach, and over time, a new team. One less rooted in and perhaps less committed to the city itself, ready to retool and build a new kind of machine that could expand globally. Unbeknownst to all of them, a key player was already on the scene who had the capacity to do just that, though he hadn't been hired for that purpose. Nate met him a little later that day.

**Nate Burke:** And interestingly, then we went over to a Mariners game and threw out the first pitch - which is pretty funny, I got to do that - but then I sat down next to and met Sutton. That was the day I met Sutton.

**Mike Cospers:** Sutton is Sutton Turner. He'd just been hired to work for Jamie Munson, the executive pastor.

**Nate Burke:** And that really...The wheels really started to come off at that point.

**Mike Cospers:** The arrival of Sutton on that day is a landmark for a number of former Mars Hill staff. Because for some, he became just as much a villain as Driscoll in those final years. He was hired by Jamie Munson, the Executive Pastor, to be the church's General Manager, which meant he was supposed to be running operations like finance, facilities, and HR. But within just a few weeks, Jamie would resign, some thought because of burnout from pulling off Qwest Field. Sutton would overnight be promoted to Executive Pastor. And the contrast between a guy like Sutton and a guy like Nate is kind of a metaphor for the transition the church was undergoing in that season.

If you look at Sutton's resume, for instance, it says CEO over and over, including work throughout the Middle East. He'd primarily come to Seattle, not for the job, but because of the church's ministry. He wanted to learn and grow spiritually and had been listening to Mars Hills' teaching online. When he saw a position available at the church, he applied for it and he got hired. And then he got thrown in the deep end, in a highly dysfunctional organization. Nate, on the other hand, was the consummate Mars Hill insider.

**Nate Burke:** I remember being at places where - especially traveling, and Jesse talks about this too - where it's like if we were there or if I was there, whoever, we were the representation of the Mars Hill Man, in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, or wherever the heck, or London or South Africa or wherever it was. And I remember him describing, Hey, the Mars Hill man, he's tatted up, he does squats and he's carrying a baby, and I'm like, He just described me. And there's at some point, you're like, Oh, that's cool, I'm cool guy. And then at some point you start realizing, I'm becoming a caricature, I'm more than that. Again, you play that part, as long as you play that part you're okay. But after, at some point you start being like, Oh, I'm a prop.

**Mike Cospers:** Nate joined Mars Hill in that second era of the church, about 2004, when they were still deeply invested in their identity as a church in and for Seattle. He'd been a musician in a bunch of indie and punk rock band, he had the tattoos, he liked MMA. He started off volunteering as a musician and eventually came on staff as an administrator, working for Tim Smith in 2006. He was quickly on Driscoll's radar though, and became his executive assistant and eventually like a chief of staff in 2008. And I think Nate articulates something that's an undercurrent for many people in this inner circle, that they did this work knowing that Driscoll had his flaws, even that he was dangerous and that there was risk in being in too close of proximity to him. But they believed in the work itself, the mission of the church. And in some ways, the precariousness of Driscoll was actually part of the thrill of the ride.

**Nate Burke:** When I think about what motivated me to get in there in the first place,

and there's things that I could say that were...I wanted to be responsible, I wanted to be a good husband and a good dad, all the usual kind of stuff. I wanted to be a man that was respected, those kinds of things. There's other motivations for other people within that, and everyone's got their thing. And I can guess at what some of them are, but I can just tell you for me, a big part of my motivation had to do with fear, and it had to do with this feeling of I didn't want to be afraid, I didn't want fear to rule me. And it's been a lifelong theme, and some people wrestle with that more than others, I suppose. But part of my reaction to it is to go into it and to try to prove to myself that I'm not afraid or to somehow master it. So when I took the job with Mark, my thinking was the closer to Caesar, the greater, the fear. If there's a job that no one else really wants, that everybody else is too scared to do, that's the one I want to do. And I think that spirit, by the end it just got out of control. He would say things like, I'm getting to 50,000 and I don't care who's with me at the top of the mountain when I get there. We're all replaceable.

What's interesting to me though, is that whole Mars Hill bus thing that's so famous now.

**Mark Driscoll:** 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.

**Nate Burke:** So I had not heard it extemporaneously, but then heard it later and I was like, the seed of that had been there for a long time.

**Mike Cospser:** What so many would discover in the next three years after Qwest Field, when 50,000 became the drum beat and the church began reorganizing everything around that goal, is just how expendable they really were, no matter how loyal, how long they'd been around, how hard they'd worked for the church or for Mark. And one of the first people to learn that was actually Nate.

**Nate Burke:** For me, a lot of that came to a head in London. It was like a month after Qwest, really shortly thereafter. We were there and he spoke at the Royal Albert Hall. Jesse was there. I am an Anglophile, Royal Albert Hall is legendary. But the trip was awful. For a bunch of reasons, Mark just wasn't doing well. Just not... He was not a well person. And I ended up... And this is after three or four years of traveling with him, Ireland, South Africa, all over the United States, Turkey. I was always trying to be a step ahead, always trying to have an itinerary ready, we've got this thing where you're gonna...boom, boom. Just like staying on top of stuff, never making mistake, as much as it was possible. I prided myself on that.

40 MIN

I got a double eye infection. I couldn't see. We went out to breakfast with this guy, named Tapi, who is a pastor. I forget where he is from, he ended up being a pastor, like a church planter outside London, amazing guy. And he met with us and he was kind of like, Are you all right? And I was like, Yeah, I got this issue. And Mark and Jesse were going to go film something that day. And so they left. Tapi walked me literally by the hand through London to go to an eye hospital, and prayed over me. And I had not had anything happen like that. It took his whole day, he stayed with me. I mean, literally by the hand, and then made sure I got back to the hotel alright. And I remember that being so strange, and still I think about it, it makes me emotional. When I got back, I'm



sitting in the room and Jesse texted me, and said, Mark wants to know if it's contagious. And they were telling me that if it didn't get better, I would've had to stay there, and he was talking about going back to America without me. And he shared a room with me, never prayed for me. And again I tell you this, I don't mean to sound petty or whatever it is, but I just knew... By that point, I knew what his character was, but I knew from that experience for sure that if I went down, he would leave me on the field. Fortunately, I recovered, was able to go back, but that was it. That was it. I couldn't do that job anymore.

And I think that's part of what I wanted people to know in terms of really dutiful men. Like the people that to some degree he preys on, the ones that are veterans, the ones that are trying to raise families and be good people. When it comes down to it, he tells you to sleep with your boots on, but he will leave you on the field. And there's all kinds of psychology and things I can't speak to. I don't know. But just to say, theology aside, I'm just saying that was my experience and feeling like, Okay, I gotta get out of this position.

**Mike Cospser:** When you survey the literature of church leadership, there's always a lot of language about sacrifice, going the extra mile, staying in the fight. And that's true of megachurches, and it's true of the smallest churches in the country. Sacrifice of some sort is to be expected, and most committed Christians are ready to give their time, their money, or their energy to the mission of their churches. And to be sure, for the Christian, the use of that language is totally legitimate. The New Testament's full of it, and church history is full of the stories of saints who give their lives away to others.

Nate's own story actually has that kind of witness in it with Tapi walking him by hand through the streets of London, praying with him, staying with him until he knew he'd be okay. But it's so easy for that language to be manipulated and for leaders to leverage it to accomplish ends that might not ultimately be about the kingdom of God or the love of their neighbor.

On an earlier episode, I mentioned that someone said to always ask who benefits. That came from Jesse Bryan, and it was about exactly this: Who benefits when leaders are calling for sacrifice from their staff and volunteers.

**Jesse Bryan:** The question is always who benefits. From the conversation, who benefits from this conversation? Does the congregation benefit or does the speaker benefit? Who benefits by getting a bunch of really goodhearted people to give, to not only work jobs so that they can take care of their families and tithe, but also give 20 hours a week at the church. Who benefits? There was a time - I was gone by then - where they said you had to work six days a week because in the Bible, they only had one day off. It was like, Great, you know who actually got two days off every week? It wasn't the rest of the staff. All of a sudden it's like, Fantastic. Guess what? We just dropped overhead by 12% because we're getting one extra day out of everyone, and we're going to grind them into the dirt if we have to. You know why? Because God needs us. That's how it works, that's the machine. You make bread out of their bones and you serve it to people for communion.

**Mike Cospser:** When people have spent years building some kind of ministry machine, a spectacle online and in person that was ostensibly meant for the good of the king-

dom of God, when they've sacrificed untold hours, taken smaller paychecks, done all the things that are often asked of people in ministry for the sake of the church, when they've given their lives away, and in the end seen it collapse and seen it exposed as being in service of one person, you can hardly blame them when they ask if the whole thing was a fraud.

Sutton Turner had one of his first moments of awakening much earlier in his time at the church, before Jamie Munson had even resigned, when another staff member came to him to raise concerns about the details of Driscoll's next book deal.

45 MIN

 @suttonturner

**Sutton Turner:** That person had come to me and gave me all of the.. Gave me basically an education of books and how it was sold, and that basically the royalties were gonna be paid by the church and Mark was still gonna get that, and then also it was gaming the system to be in New York Times bestseller, but that the church was buying all the books. And it had to be, I think it was 10,000 books over a short period of time in New York City, in those bookstores that this company would go around and purchase. And so I raised those things to Jamie, that I didn't agree with that and I didn't want to go forward with that. Obviously it was executed and gone on. And then come back in October, I get... This is after we're full fledged into New York Times. They're starting on the pre-sales, they're buying pre-sale books to get on the thing, and we get the contract from ResultSource. Jamie's not around to sign it and I have to sign it. And I actually sent Dave an email that day saying, This is, like, crazy that I'm the guy that actually has to sign it when I was the guy that was against it in the first place. I knew by signing and it was not the right thing to do, but I also knew that the church had moved forward with the contract, and we had already written them the check. So the contract was only a formality at that point in time.

**Mike Cospers:** In all, Mars Hill would pay more than \$200,000 to get Real Marriage onto the New York Times bestseller list. To the outside world, the end of 2011 looked like a big win for the church. They pulled off Qwest Field, Real Marriage was a success, the numbers were all getting bigger month over month. But clouds were gathering on the horizon and this book deal was one of them. Others that were coming soon involved more antics with James MacDonald, throwing some of the wrong people under the bus, and getting the attention of two guys named Warren.

Nate Burke transitioned away from his role with Driscoll by the end of 2011, and would serve about 18 months as the executive pastor at Ballard before leaving the church altogether in 2013. He looks back now at his years with the church with a kind of stark realism and regret.

**Nate Burke:** The thing that I'll say sometimes is it feels like there's a Confederate uniform in my attic, and I can unpack that four ways. One is, it's an officer's uniform. When I think about it, it's like to some degree I didn't get rid of the uniform. I wouldn't say that I'm proud of it either. I didn't throw it away because it's true, it happened. And I would say what's really interesting to me thinking about this and talking to Jesse recently about it too, is I was really good at it. There was that Ken Burns Vietnam series, if you ever saw that. There's this Special Forces guy that was in Vietnam pretty early on, and he is an old guy now. And he's interviewed and he says, It's really weird or strange being

at your best, doing something that was so bad. And some part of me feels that where it's like, Oh, I was really good at that but at the end of the day, I don't think I was helping anybody. It turned out I was in the wrong side of the war.

**Mike Cosper:** Creating the facade that surrounded Driscoll, creating his image. Some of that was done with media, some with their presence, some through people like Nate's capacity to just help manage Driscoll as a person, to know how to help restrain some of his worst impulses. And all of it was undertaken with a sense that it was for the mission. But that day in London revealed how hollow things were behind the veneer. He couldn't help but wonder what he was really protecting anymore, or why. Christians worship a crucified savior, one who made Himself nothing, who drew near to sinners, tax collectors, drunks, prostitutes, all kinds of social outcasts, people who offered him no power or leverage. And church history is full of saints whose service to the world on behalf of Jesus led similarly to sacrifice, to drawing near to the lowly, even to marching to their deaths. That includes Thomas Cranmer, who was ultimately martyred for, among other things, his work on the prayer book.

That history is also full of saints who show up in less spectacular ways, who will simply take the time to walk you to a doctor. Who'll pray over you, who let their plans be interrupted as long as necessary, just to make sure that you're okay. Something about the contrast between power and weakness that was exposed in London left Nate without the will to stay in the fight at the church.

**Nate Burke:** By the time I got out, and certainly after, it felt like we needed to lose, we deserved to lose. It was a relief when we did.

50 MIN

**Mike Cosper:** Thanks for listening. If you want to support the show, please leave us a rating and review in iTunes. It will 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/Marshall](http://orderct.com/Marshall).

Justin Forsett, the Seattle Seahawks running back that you heard early in the episode, has a fascinating story all of his own. He was a guest of mine on the Cultivated podcast a while back, you can find that wherever you listen to podcasts.

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. Additional editing by Resonate Recordings and Matt Linder. 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 The Bridge by Taylor Leonhardt.

Special thanks to Ben Vandermeer. Graphic design by Bryan Todd. Social media by Nicole Shanks. Editorial consulting by our online managing editor Andrea Palpant Dilley. CT's executive editor is Ted Olsen, and our editor in chief is Timothy Dalrymple.