THE RISE & FALL OF MARS HILL

EPISODE 3

07.07.2021

50 MIN

‘You Read the Bible, Ringo?’

It takes tenacity to plant a church, but unchecked tenacity has consequences.

SHOW NOTES

Church planting, even under the best of circumstances, always requires grit and determination. Planting in one of the most progressive cities in the US at the turn of the millennium required an abundance of both. But if Mark Driscoll struggled with anything in his ministry, it wasn’t a lack of will.

The earliest days of Mars Hill were a whirlwind of activity: launching new campuses, preaching as many as seven times a Sunday, assimilating new people, and developing new ministries all at once. The church quickly proved to be a magnet for spiritual seekers of all kinds—eager Christians looking to build, apathetic Christians needing renewal, and non-Christians hearing the gospel in a new context.

On this episode of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, we take you inside that hive of activity to examine the ways God was at work. You’ll see Mark Driscoll not only as a preacher and a movement leader, but as a caring pastor.

You’ll also see signs of volatility in Mark’s ministry. Tensions in the Young Leaders Network start to build, and a pivot in Mark’s own convictions pushes them to their limits.

Meanwhile, inside Mars Hill, a throwaway remark at a friendly dinner becomes the catalyst for intense, life-altering conflict.

MASTHEAD

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

Executive Producer: Erik Petrik

Producer, Writer, Editor, and Host: Mike Cosper

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: “Did I Tell You the Bullet’s Still There” by Bill Mallonee

---

Transcription: Cheryl Penner

Transcript Design: Alecia Sharp

TRANSCRIPT

Jen Smidt: Phil and I got married in '93. We were both raised in the church. I would say we both loved Jesus deeply.

@MikeCosper

Mike Cosper: This is Jen Smidt describing why she and her husband, Phil, decided to join the core team from Mars Hill.

Jen Smidt: I think before Mars Hill, we were at a church that we didn't feel like was all that challenging on a deep spiritual level and we were looking for something more. So when the opportunity to join this core group led by a young guy who had really interesting ideas and vision, we decided fit better for us than where we were at.

Mike Cosper: Church planting is one of the best ways to effect the kind of generational change the Gen Xers were looking for. It attracted folks like Jen and Phil Smith who wanted to experience something new and something challenging. And because in a church plant you can build from the ground up and build something that looks different, it can give a renewed sense of the plausibility of Christianity to people who might otherwise not darken the door of a church, but building from the ground up and trying to connect with disaffected people comes with challenges all its own.

Here's Mark Driscoll in 2007, reflecting back on some of those obstacles.

@PastorMark

Mark Driscoll: I wasn't licensed to ordain. I'd actually never been a pastor of a church or a member in a church, so it seemed like a good idea to start my own. And so I was 25 years of age at the time, my wife was pregnant with our first child, and we started with a small group of indie rockers, committed to anarchy and poverty. They didn't make a great core group. They didn't organize or give well, much to my surprise.

Mike Cosper: When you decide to plant a church, there will almost always be naysayers. People who think that we either have enough churches already or as I experienced, and was the case at Mars Hill, people who think the kind of folks you want to reach will never enable the church to be self-supporting. The sense of resistance is intense, almost overwhelming.

A few years back when I was still pastoring, I went to a retreat where the speaker was Rich Plass. Rich was a church planter himself who, after handing off his church to a successor, became a counselor focused on pastoral health and sustainability in ministry. The retreat was all about making a transition from the frantic energy most leaders live in, to a Sabbath way of life, a vision of prayerful, unhurried and unanxious work. The room was full of men and women like me with a decade or more of ministry and a fair share of burnout and exhaustion. Towards the end someone asked him, You keep talking in terms of transition, they said, I'm curious, have you ever seen anyone actually plant this way with balance and healthy rhythms from the beginning. Rich shrugged and cracked a bit of a smile. Well, he said, it takes a certain audacity to think that you can plant a church. Anyone who thinks they can do it has to be a little bit crazy.

Mike Cosper: From Christianity Today, this is Mike Cosper and you're listening to the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. It's the story of one church that grew from a handful of people to a movement and then collapsed, almost overnight. It's a story about power, fame and

spiritual trauma, problems spaced across the spectrum of churches in America. And yet it's also a story about the mystery of God working in broken places. On today's episode, we're looking at Mars Hill's early years and the ongoing transitions happening as Gen X looked at the world and the church, and asked in the words of Jules Winnfield, Do you read the Bible, Ringo?

5 MIN

There's an oft-quoted statistic that 80% of church plants fail in the first two years. Where this number came from is unclear. What is clear is that it's wrong. Almost exactly wrong. In the heat of the church planting boom of the 2000's, Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird assembled a report called the State of Church Planting, and they found that about 68% of church plants lasted four years or more. They also found that successful growing church plants tended to have aggressive and tenacious leaders. And for people like Jen Smidt, who was looking for something rigorous and challenging for her faith, those qualities were part of what drew her in to Mars Hill.

Jen Smidt: I guess what appealed to me initially, he was a young guy who had some really clear and definitive ideas about church and marriage and manhood and womanhood. He really had kind of an answer or a template for whatever you would ask him about. Very self-assured and confident. So for me to see a man who was being really clear and vocal and specific about what it looked like to love God, love your family, be a man, be a woman, that appealed to me deeply.

Mike Cosper: On our first episode, you heard Joel Brown talking about the heart of rebellion and the punk rock spirit that shaped life at Mars Hill. Much of that was visible in the way they bucked the conventions of evangelical churches that were dominant at the time. But part of it was also a rebellion against the progressive norms and values of Seattle itself. Here's Mark again, in that same talk from 2007.

Mark Driscoll: We graduated, moved back to Seattle, which was our hometown - least churched city in America, along with Portland, more dogs than Christians, more dogs than children. Dr. Ed Stetzer, the Yoda of missiology, says that our Christian population is about the same as mainland communist China.

Mike Cosper: Here again is sociologist of religion Gerardo Marti.

@praxishabitus

Gerardo Marti: Evangelicals like Mark Driscoll have this really intriguing relationship with their cities. On the one hand, they want to be able to say, We are successful in a world-class city because the city in and of itself has status. On the other hand, the city has always been seen as a den of evil, something that is always threatening, but by being in the city, they are asserting that they are not only standing their ground, but that they are successful at contending against those exact things.

Mike Cosper: As Driscoll would tell Dave Travis, his vision was not only to resist the city, but to transform it.

@davetravis

Dave Travis: I think one of the things to understand about Mark and Mars Hill, Mark was mentored by Ken Hutcherson, which is on the east side of Seattle, which is a high-tech white collar-ish area, more conservative for Seattle.

Mike Cosper: Real quick context here. Ken Hutcherson was the pastor of Antioch Bible Church, the church where Mark served in youth ministry. They provided support, mentoring for Mark after sending him out to plant Mars Hill. It was also the church where Jen Smith and her husband Phil attended before joining Mark's core team.

Dave Travis: He planted in Ballard... or the church is in Ballard, the base church - it's two different cities separated by what they call a lake - which is a much more Bohemian culture. And Mark's style, Mars Hill's style, was more, No, this is the truth, this is the gospel. And he attracted those people in those communities that said, Yeah that's what we want for our families. We want to... Mark said many times, What we want to do here is we want you to get saved, get discipled, get married, get a job, buy a house, and in 40 years we'll own this town.

Mike Cosper: Even after all the reporting I've done for this story, a lingering question for me is how much that big, transformational vision was in Mark's mind at the very beginning of Mars Hill, and how much it developed and expanded over time. On the one hand, there are folks like Dave Travis, who seemed to have seen early on that Mark was keyed in on that kind of vision.

I spoke to another person who met Mark in the Young Leaders Network around the time of Mars Hill's launch, and his thought after first meeting him was, "That guy is going to plant a big, big church." But inside Mars Hill, it seems like that idea was far from most people's minds.

Jen Smidt: It was exciting and novel and rich, and by no means at that point in our minds were we signing on to become part of a mega church. Mark had ideas about ministering to University of Washington kids, maybe starting a record label, doing a coffee house. He had some ideas like that, but by no means at that time did it feel like we were on some sort of shooting star, or riding the coattails of a rising star. The community was authentic and it felt very real and easy to just be yourself in kind of a different context than church, even at Antioch where you drove a certain car and you wore certain clothes. It just was a place where you could feel connected to others and just be real.

10 MIN

Mike Cosper: Church plants tend to attract a cross section of people. Jen and Phil Smidt are examples of an essential constituency, committed Christians who were excited about starting something new.

Another part of that cross section, we might call disaffected Christians, people who maybe had church backgrounds, but for one reason or another, have drifted away. Joel Brown fits that description well. He grown up with parents in ministry, but as he set out on his own, a combination of apathy and depression led them away from the church. He had moved to Seattle to go to audio school when his parents emailed him about this new edgy little church they'd heard about called Mars Hill. He ignored the idea of going until his stepbrother showed up on his doorstep one Sunday and basically dragged him there.

@bJoelBrown

Joel Brown: He comes to my house unannounced one night and he says, "Hey, come on, we're going to go to church together." And so he takes me to Mars Hill church, and I remember up in the front, they had all of these candles and candelabras and things up

in the front lit. They were trying to pull off this somehow of a resurgence of the sacred. There was some sort of connection to something bigger, something more historical, something more transcendent. They used a lot of, like, Celtic crosses. I don't think we ever used papyrus, but any typeface that sort of looked old was probably welcomed.

Mike Cosper: In context, that desire for connection to the past was one of the church's innovations. Many church planters had been avoiding religious symbols and architecture for decades. So you have this bold set of contradictions inside Mars Hill. The church setting, the decor, the crowd of indie rockers dressed in black and covered in tattoos. And then Mark preaching loud, brash sermons for an hour or more.

Joel Brown: I remember immediately being pretty captivated. Maybe that's not the right word, maybe that sounds too lovey-dovey. But I was immediately engaged. Even in that one meeting, I was like, Oh, this actually has relevance to my life. I've often said, I heard the gospel my whole life. My parents are really faithful Christians. But I don't think I really heard it until I came to Mars Hill, if you know what I mean.

Mike Cosper: Joel was hooked. It felt like a spiritual home. And within weeks he was playing drums with the band. In the years ahead, he'd come on staff and served as a worship leader and a pastor.

And then there's the kind of person that every church planter hopes and prays shows up at their church. People who come in who aren't believers at all, like James Harleman.

@Harlemanic

James Harleman: We were coming up on the year 2000. Y2K was... There was a lot of heightened things going on at the time. So my conversion dovetailed with a lot of sort of cultural fear and kind of that whole zeitgeist.

Mike Cosper: James was primarily drawn in by the preaching, the two pages of notes that accompanied every sermon, the ability of Mark and others to make connections between the world of the Bible and the world he occupied, which was largely the world of movies. And after attending a few weeks, he had a life-changing moment.

James Harleman: It really hit me at one moment after - I don't remember if I was coming home - and I just started crying because it was the first time I'd really encountered someone teaching a God that was overwhelming, a God that was irresistible. I think I predominantly heard more of a sales pitch like Jesus...Pastors were used car salesmen in my mind up to that point, pitching me this deal, Jesus is knocking at the door, Let Him in, you get a good deal. Here it was less of a make a decision and more bow in submission. A Jesus that had authority, a Jesus that could blow me away like Paul on the road to Damascus. Literally, I just was driving home and felt like that, and tears started coming down and it's like, This is true, I have to believe it.

Mike Cosper: Here's Ed Stetzer describing his impression of those early days.

@edstetzer

Ed Stetzer: There was something to see. There was a spectacle of sorts that was taking place in Ballard, and people would come to it, and they'd park from far away and they'd walk to get there. You could feel it in the room. And I could tell you for me, I felt it in the

room at Saddleback in similar ways 15 years earlier. Went from major chords to minor chords. The way the communication took place, the lighting and everything else. But there was still to me a commonality that they had. And some people would hate this language, but they had engineered a church service and experience that was appealing to people who were unchurched and de-churched.

Mike Cosper: That sense that there's something to see can often expand a church plant's reach in surprising directions. Where in many churches, parents are trying to find ways to get their adult family members to show up on Sundays, churches like Mars Hill can actually have the opposite effect. Young people get involved in the church plant, and the renewal they experience ends up being a catalyst for their parents showing up at the church.

That was the case for Rob Smith. And when he showed up what he witnessed was category breaking for him.

15 MIN

@robthainsmith

Rob Smith: My kids started going to one of the... to the Paradox that Leif Moi had bought and then gave it to Mars Hill church. And it was a theater in the university district. So he would do service on a Sunday night, and my kids all like going, and I thought I better go see what's going on there. My kids, they were, 15, 16 and 18, in that age group, so I thought I better see what they're up to. So I went there and it was strange because this guy came up, dressed Gothic style, with a wife with black, long hair, black robes, a child dressed in black. He was dressed in black, tattoos all over, five or six rings on his ear. And he went up and gave the announcements. I was just thinking, "That guy needs to hang around me and get discipled." So I listened to the sermon, Leif preached, and afterwards they had communion. And so I was just watching this, I was just a spectator. And I watched that guy go and take communion with his family. But I noticed he didn't swallow it down immediately, he carried it back to the pew, and I kept my eyes on him. I'm going to choke up. He sat down and then put his arm around his wife, and he prayed for his family. And then he took communion. And I don't know if you remember the line in Mere Christianity, if you've read it, where there's a line that says, I'd rather be the prostitute in the back row, asking God for repentance, than the prig on row four, judging her. I felt like I was that woman in row four, judging the harlot, and God convicted me. And I just decided I was going to be at ease with the music and with the tattoos, and with the edge that Mars Hill had that jarred me. After that it no longer jarred me. We loved it. We did not miss it. We would center our lives around it. We eventually moved from Everett down to Seattle so we'd be close to Mars Hill church.

Mike Cosper: Karen Schaeffer's story begins in a similar manner. She and her husband, Greg, had been members of a large Presbyterian church in the city for about 25 years, and they'd been there happily. Her oldest son though, had been through a dark period, which culminated in a car accident that nearly took his life. Out of that crisis, he had a renewed sense of curiosity that led them to Mars Hill, and Mars Hill was utterly transformative for him. Soon, her youngest son started attending as well, and Karen and Greg decided to go see what was happening.

Karen Schaeffer: What really struck me as I sat there - we sat behind our sons - is their complete involvement in this. Hands raised, leaning forward, singing at the top of their

lungs. It made me cry. I sat there with tears streaming down my face.

Mike Cosper: Mark was, of course, at the center of all this, and at that time was really invested in the community at Mars Hill. In producing this, I've heard many stories from inside the church of Mark's pastoral presence and generosity.

One story came from Wendy Alsup, who led the women's ministry at Mars Hill for much of her time at the church. When she arrived in 2002 though, she and her husband were just members of the church; transplants from the east coast who were intending to be part of the core team for another church plant happening up north from Seattle.

@WendyAlsup

Wendy Alsup: We had moved to Seattle in August and in early November, Andy, my ex-husband, was having chest pains and problems. He went in to get checked and he needed...They found out he had a prolapsed heart valve and he needed immediate open-heart surgery. So the week of Thanksgiving, he had open heart surgery to replace his heart valve.

Mike Cosper: Mark had heard about the upcoming surgery, and the Sunday before, he brought Wendy and Andy on stage to pray for them. Afterwards, he gave Wendy a card with his phone number and said if she needed anything at all, just to give him a call. They lived around the corner from the hospital.

20 MIN

Wendy Alsup: Well, Andy's heart stopped after surgery, and he was in very, very bad shape. And the second night I just was such a mess from being tired and I just broke down in Andy's room, and I needed a place to stay. So I called Mark, sobbing on the phone. I could probably barely get it out - snot running down your face, that kind of crisis - and asked.. I said, "Hey, I do need a place to stay." He said, "Okay, come around the corner." So I walked on down to their house and he and Grace greeted me. And I didn't really know them, but he and Grace greeted me and they opened up their sofa bed and put a fire log on in their fireplace. It was the night before Thanksgiving. I remember he gave me some Sleepy Time tea, and pulled out a bottle of rum. And I grew up kind of a fundamentalist Christian, and I didn't know what to do with rum and tea, and I said, "Well, what can you put rum in?" And he said, "You can put rum in anything." So I put rum in my tea. I don't know, they just put their arms around me and prayed for me. I went to sleep, and then I left that next morning before they even got up.

I'm not the only person that has a story like that with Mark. Mark and Grace really opened their homes in the early years, and they parented and brothered and sistered so many folks in those early years of the church. There were a lot of folks with a lot of struggles and without family around them. A lot of people are conflicted when they get frustrated with them, because we all have these experiences as well of being truly pastored.

Mike Cosper: Whatever else you make of the Mars Hill story, these moments are an essential part of the plot: Calling and purpose, spiritual homecoming, an encounter with God, or in the midst of a crisis, a warm bed and a hot cup of rum and tea. Each person you've heard in these stories ended up investing years of their life at Mars Hill, most for more than a decade. And the real tragedy of the church's collapse only makes sense when you see the profound impact it had on lies like these. And they are just a snapshot

of how wide and deep that impact was.

We'll be right back.

Mike Cosper: My first encounter with Mars Hill was in October, 2001. It was just a little over a month after 9/11, and a group of us had flown to Seattle to attend a conference called Soularize - that's S-O-U-L - put on by an organization with a name that epitomizes ministry in the late nineties, The Ooze. I'd never been to Seattle, never heard of Mars Hill, never heard of Mark Driscoll. But we were a year into church planting and our lead pastor had, and he thought attending this event, headlined by people like Leonard Sweet and Sally Morgenthaler, would be a great opportunity to think, learn and build some comradery with a few members of our team.

Almost by accident, I ended up signing up for Driscoll's breakout session, which was simply called The Gospel, and it was an experience I'll probably never forget. Some context is probably helpful to understand what happened in that particular breakout. Again, it's 2001, so about five years into Mars Hill, and a little longer into the experimenting that Leadership Network had done, bringing together people like Driscoll, Doug Pagitt, Brian McLaren and others, some of whom were at that event. It's also a month after 9/11, and as a result, the organizers of the conference had shifted the programming.

Here's Spencer Burke, the creator of The Ooze.

@SpencerBurke

Spencer Burke: We had organized quickly from the Muslim Student Union - I think it was UDub - and asked some Muslim leadership to come over and do a workshop. And it was fascinating because three of them were in conversation about their faith and how they connected. In fact, there was a fascinating idea because both - there was one male and two women - and they came in full religious - is it called a burka, I believe. And as one woman was speaking, every time she gave an answer, she removed one piece of the veil, the head covering, the robe. And people were like, Whoa, what's going on? She goes, Oh, I can wear this and I don't need to wear this. It was, like, so amazing to break down all these stereotypes. And then at lunch, you go to a three-hour Native American potlatch where you'd sit next to Richard Rohr, who was a Franciscan monk, and the tribes went up and spoke powerfully about how they were still waiting for the gospel because Father Sarah totally hurt them.

Mike Cosper: And into all of this comes Mark Driscol.

Mark Driscoll: I think the place that we're at right now is that the gospel is a diamond, and the Spirit of the age is just a dunghill, and as that diamond rolls down a hill, after a while you get more dung than diamond, and then reformation is the place of chipping away and getting back to what originally was worthwhile, that first poetic image rather than all the manmade images that we've layered on top of that. The thing that I am seeing today that really concerns me is a strong lack of conversation about God. God is not the theme of the day. The sky fairy is. We have God bless America, and we have all of this conversation about this unknown god, and he's the sky fairy or she's the sky fairy. And it's just like this cosmic pinata that we all gather around and toss prayers to, hoping that we'll whack it and goodies will fall out.

And my fear for many of you is this. I can be a total *** about this - I probably will before I'm done - but I really concerned sincerely about neo-liberalism that just comes in and takes a philosophical concept and then elevates that as a new gospel. Because the scripture is clear that Galatians says that if anybody comes proclaiming another gospel, tell them to go to hell.

Mike Cosper: As you can probably tell already, he's in a pretty different place than he was when he gave the talk you heard on the previous episode from 1997. His posture towards the world is much more us versus them, and pretty much all of the talk about the need for artists, mystics and philosophers is gone. Even the talk about post-modernity is mostly tossed aside as a distraction, navel gazing that gets in the way of the church's mission. But as the talk went on, he got more and more aggressive, and the air got thick and tense. People eventually stopped laughing, especially as the conversation turned towards gender and sexuality.

25 MIN

Mark Driscoll: Most postmodern philosophers are gay men. So you wonder why, if we swim in their stream, we end up wearing pink and singing love songs to God, which is not advantageous when you're at war. There's a reason why in every nation of the world, in every theology, more women than men come to church. Your biggest problem is getting your men to give a [CENSORED]. If you don't give them a biblical masculinity, they will go adopt chauvinism. They'll drink beer, nail women, pick fights, and they're not going to come to your church where you got some Will and Grace worship leader, and you've got a bunch of love songs to some sky fairy.

Mike Cosper: Eventually he starts speaking even more directly with hostility towards the conference itself.

Mark Driscoll: What are you being sold? Just be honest, guys, let's take the fig Leif off. I'll be the one fly in the appointment this week. That's fine. It's not because I hate you, it's because I love you. It's because I've done everything they're telling you to do, and I woke up and I didn't have a pure heart, a clean conscience or a sincere faith. And I had to repent to God, trying to be cool rather than faithful.

Mike Cosper: Almost an hour in, people in the audience start talking back to him, pushing back and arguing. And I think part of what you hear in the midst of ugly slurs and stereotypes from Mark - the worst of which frankly I'm not putting in here - is his own sense that he's gotten something really wrong and that the pendulum is now swinging hard in the other direction.

Mark Driscoll: I'm in a place of deep and profound conviction now about the power of the gospel in my own foolishness, and the inability of the church or gender or psychology or self-help or entertainment to do anything that the gospel can do.

Audience member: You know that, that's a totally duelage view of how God works. Doesn't God also reveal through all other aspects, not just within the scripture...

Mark Driscoll: But not salvifically.

Audience member: Well...

Mark Driscoll: There is general revelation... If I look at that tree, I will not rise from my death at the end of the age.

Audience member: That is...

Mark Driscoll: I need Christ crucified, died, raised,

Audience member: You do. And God will reveal Christ risen in other things too.

Mark Driscoll: So people get saved by looking at creation

Audience member: ...fundamentalist view of scripture, and it's not,

Mark Driscoll: There is no other name under which a man may be saved, but Christ. You're telling... You're a Universalist. You're arguing that there is...

Audience member: I'm... Universalist...

Mark Driscoll: You are a Universalist, you are Universalist. Okay, then we have a huge, freaking issues with you...

Audience member: Of course...

Mark Driscoll: ...because I'm not a Universalist, I'm a Christian. That's why I'm not at the ecumenical prayer services. I love them and I pray for their salvation, but I will not have an unknown God who is a sky fairy that I hold hands with everybody else that pretend that we're all going to usher into the kingdom together. I need Christ.

Mike Cosper: The guy arguing with Mark eventually got up and walked out as, did a number of others. Mark continued his talk though, and ended by taking some questions from the audience. Right at the very end of his time, someone else started up with him again, particularly frustrated about the way he treated the guy who walked out.

Mark Driscoll: I asked him, real quick I said, Are you a Universalist, he said, Yes. I said, So you're... I was confirming him defining himself. And even in a postmodern world, I get to name myself.

Audience member 2: Mark, you...

Mark Driscoll: Here's my final word. You know how we find the line? How do we find the line? We cross it, and then we know where it is. That's my value. My workshop, my value. You guys have a good lunch.

Mike Cosper: Here's Spencer Burke again.

Spencer Burke: Mark was always kind of fire and brimstone, and so he was definitely a

provocateur. Also, to be fair, he was very sick, so he was determined to come in and do the workshop. And I think there were a thousand different things that came upon that. I'll tell you, as soon as the workshop was over, I heard. Everybody heard. It wasn't particular that they came to me, but everybody was in conversation about it.

@TimAndSmith

Tim Smith: I remember that breakout.

Mike Cosper: This is Tim Smith, who you heard from on our first episode. He'd already been on staff at Mars Hill for a few years, by this point. And for that team, this combative spirit was part of the appeal.

Tim Smith: I can remember that room, standing room only. And that was the par for the course, like every time when Driscoll would go to conferences, he would just go and just light everybody up because he was just so disgusted by it. But oh man, he just would trash people and we would cheer and then go out for beers afterwards and talk about it for a week.

Mike Cosper: There were actually quite a few Mars Hill staffers who remembered this event. As Tim said, it wasn't the only time Mark created conflict at a conference, but the degree of hostility, a shouting match with the audience, and the fact that Mark came in sick, exhausted and angry, made it stick out in their minds. They also saw it as part of a larger shift. Many of the Gen X leaders who'd been part of the same cohort with Mark coming up in the nineties, were deepening their investment in the ideas of postmodernism, creating distance between themselves and mainstream evangelicalism. Much of Mark's vitriol in his session at The Ooze was taking direct aim at that shift.

30 MIN

At the same time, his own theological commitments were hardening. I confess it's been a little difficult to sort out exactly when and how Mark made a shift to calling himself reformed. It seems like if you were inside Mars Hill, he always was. For instance, many people remember early on seeing Douglas Wilson's writings featuring prominently in the church's resources. But outside Mars Hill, quite a few folks remember a specific pivotal moment where his theological convictions changed. Here's Doug Pagitt again from the Young Leaders Network.

@pagitt

Doug Pagitt: He changed. He locked into a theological perspective that caused a great riff in our friendship and our relationship. It was fundamentally a theological break that came along with a relational break because of just the way he treated people who disagreed with him, theologically.

Mike Cosper: Rick McKinley and Mark had been particularly close and like-minded, and they'd go on to help lead Acts 29 together in the years ahead. Rick also remembers the specific moment when Mark made a pivot.

@RickMcKinleypdx

Rick McKinley: There was a moment where he went away for the summer to figure out his theology and kind of these things, and he came back feeling like, I'm reformed, I'm this and that. And that's when I would say the window shut into his heart.

Mike Cosper: Tony Jones remembers this transition too.

@jonestony

Tony Jones: We did a series of regional events, and I think I went to the ones in Denver and Minneapolis, and there was one in Seattle, there was one in Texas. But the one in Seattle, there was like a closing panel discussion. Driscoll said in an offhanded way something like, Well, none of this really matters because God made some of you to be matchsticks anyway. He articulated this very conservative Calvinistic, the elect versus the damned, theology, which you talk to people who are on stage with him - people like Brad Cecil and Doug Pagitt - and they were stunned. That was the beginning of the end, and it really frayed the relationship between Driscoll and a lot of the other leaders in the Emergent movie.

Mike Cosper: Mark's move here, creating this distance, happens to coincide with the gathering steam around the new Calvinism, also known as the young restless reformed movement. Over the next decade, he would become one of the leading voices of that movement. His preaching and writing were deeply shaped by reformed theology, and his book, Doctrine, a 465-page tome co-written with Gary Breshears, is a straightforward, systematic framework of reformed theology.

Given the investment he made here and the impact it had in shaping the thoughts of Mars Hill members and Christians around the globe who read his books and downloaded his sermons, it seems cynical to suggest that anything about this shift might be about opportunity. And yet, since leaving Mars Hill, he's rejected reformed theology. In an interview with a pastor named Matt Brown on the Debrief show, he said the whole young, restless reformed movement is made up of little boys with father wounds. He also said he doesn't hold to the five points of Calvinism. I think they're garbage, he said.

There's an old saying: If all you've got's a hammer, then everything looks like a nail. In these early days at Mars Hill, there was a lot of hammer swinging going on, and that's not unique to Mark. Church planting always requires an enormous amount of effort, pushing against all kinds of resistance. But in the Mars Hill story, the nails did seem to be everywhere. Boomer churches, Emergent churches, the city of Seattle, hostile outsiders. And then, as became more and more clear over time, hostility, real or perceived, coming from within.

Here's Joel Brown again.

Joel Brown: I'll rewind to tell a story that Mark told a lot publicly, and I think it's telling into one of the biggest underlying dynamics of the church.

35 MIN

He was going to plant Mars Hill, and the night before they held their first gathering, he had a dream where a guy walked up to him. In this dream, it was vivid, he was in the church building that they were going to be meeting in the next day. And the guy who walked up to him was a guy who had been a part of their core, who he trusted, who he knew. And in the dream, the guy walked up to him and he says, basically, I'm going to take over Mars Hill, you're done here, this is my church now. And the next day they go to hold their public gathering and the guy walks in and essentially does exactly what Mark's dream was. And of course, Mark gets rid of this guy and he casts him out and so forth. But there always was - I was going to say there always seemed to be - but there always was this underlying assumption that Mark had that people were trying to take his power, people were trying to take his church from him. And I think it's so fascinat-

ing that he had that dream that first Sunday. Now, I wasn't there so I couldn't tell you whether the story that he told about that guy was actually accurate or not. Maybe that guy didn't do any of that stuff, maybe he did exactly what Mark dreamt and that was the vision from God. I have no idea. But what is so clear, there was this constant desire to protect his power and to make sure that he maintained control.

Mike Cosper: The speed at which someone could find themselves on the wrong side of a power struggle with Mark - whether that struggle was real or perceived - was breathtaking. And Karen Schaeffer is an early example of the consequences of that perception. You heard about Karen a little earlier when she described coming to Mars Hill because of the spiritual awakening she saw in her sons. When they arrived at the church, there were only about 200 people attending and they watched the church grow rapidly through those early years. Karen was in graduate school at the time, working on a Master's in organizational leadership. And when Mark saw her passion for the church and her gifts, he reached out to her with an idea.

Karen Schaeffer: He said, I know that you went to school because you want to lead an organization, but, he said, I really think we need you and I need you, and I would really love it if you would come and work for me and be my executive assistant. I went home and I told my husband and we prayed about it, and I remember saying to him - very prophetically, actually - it's really dangerous to work for the church you love.

Mike Cosper: Mars Hill was bursting at the seams at the time, and Mark was preaching seven times every Sunday. The church's finances were disorganized and scattered. Everything was a frenzy, trying to keep up with the Sunday to Sunday work. A building campaign that came up a few months later, pushed an already worn-out team deeper and deeper into a deficit, weariness.

Karen Schaeffer: He was exhausted. And he wouldn't say to me every once in a while, I think my adrenals are shot. He just was operating on fumes, and he was just spent.

Mike Cosper: Karen, meanwhile, was pouring her life into the church, helping with the capital campaign, working on décor, and serving as Mark's assistant along the way. Several months after they'd moved into the building, Karen was at a dinner with several other families from the church. After the meal, as things were winding down, she found herself in a conversation with two elders' wives who wanted to know what it was like working for Mark. She started that conversation naming off what she loved about Mark and Mars Hill: His love of the scriptures, the help she could provide on sermons and Sunday prep, watching Mark's mind work, his photographic memory, his family. And then they asked what the most difficult thing was about working for Mark.

Karen Schaeffer: My answer was not about myself so much at all. I said, I think it's watching him and seeing that he needs more men around him to go toe to toe with him. He needs more men who will not say yes to him, but really challenge him.

Mike Cosper: She didn't think anything more about it, and a couple of days went by. Then she got a call from Jamie Munson, Mars Hill's executive pastor, asking her to come to a meeting with him and Mark. She knew something was up. So on a Thursday at two

o'clock, she showed up at Jamie's office, unsure what to expect.

40 MIN

Karen Schaeffer: Jamie's office was much smaller than Mark's, and we were almost knee-to-knee, all three of us, and there was this immediate sense of - for me anyway – intimidation. I could see that Mark was blazing mad, and I've never experienced in my life up to that point, that kind of rage emanating from anyone. And so I sat down and he said to me, Do you know why you're here? And he said, You're being accused of heresy. And my... I just lost all sense of myself other than this kind of sound, almost feeling of rushing water through my body. I was just in shock. And I said, What? And he said, You're being accused of heresy because you've said that you don't trust the leadership in this church, and really what you've said could destroy this church.

Mike Cosper: Let's make sure our terms are clear. To be a heretic involves some key denial of the Christian faith. So in response to Karen suggesting that having a few older, wiser men around might be a good thing, she was accused not of insubordination or disrespect, but heresy.

Karen Schaeffer: All I knew about heresy was wrapped up basically in the story of Joan of Ark, so I just couldn't wrap my mind around this. But I said, Well, what I did say is that you need more men around you, men like Mike Gunn, to go toe-to-toe with you.

Mike Cosper: It's worth pausing to mention something we haven't gotten into yet. And I assure you we will get into it a lot more later. Mars Hill actually had three founders: Driscoll, Leif Moi, and Mike Gunn, who Karen just mentioned. If you came after a certain point in Mars Hill's history, you'd likely never have known about Mike and Leif, and we'll get into that story and all of its complexity in a future episode. But for now, know that Mike had one of those rare reputations inside Mars Hill, as someone who wasn't afraid of Mark.

Karen Schaeffer: Instead of saying to me, Oh, is that what you said, why did you say that? He said to me, Oh Mike Gunn, he'll never have a church of more than 250. And Mark said something to me that he said a lot. He said, Trust is really hard to earn, and it's really easy to lose.

Mike Cosper: Karen wasn't placed under church discipline or signed up for a heresy trial, but she did lose her job, and she found herself in a bewildered place. At one moment, accused of something as dramatic and over the top as heresy, and then just as suddenly it was all over.

Karen Schaeffer: Mark called me over to his house the day after he really let me go. And he didn't ask for my forgiveness, what he did was he told me why he was the victim here.

@chuckdegroat

Chuck DeGroat: I often talk about a kind of hero/martyr/victim complex within a narcissist, and narcissistic leader.

Mike Cosper: Chuck DeGroat is a professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan, and he's the author of When Narcissism Comes to Church.

Chuck DeGroat: It's really hard to interrogate yourself, when you've got a really good story to tell. That's why it's so hard when you've got prominent leaders – Mark, Bill Hybels, others - who can point to the fruits, and then maybe acknowledge that they'd been a little rough around the edges. Yeah, maybe it's not perfect. You're a hero but you're also a villain because no one really gets you. You're really entitled to that big office and those incredible comforts, because you have to take a lot of crap as a pastor. And that's a really toxic mindset to be in. When I encounter pastors like that, and I start hearing things like that – Like, people don't know how much I give, and they don't know how much I take from people.

Mike Cosper: Combine that with the sense that the entire wellbeing of a church is on one person's shoulders, as it can be both in the biggest mega churches and the smallest church plants, and that argument becomes dangerously potent.

Karen Schaeffer: Three or four months after this all happened, Mark was preaching a sermon on friendship and he talked about how he'd been betrayed by some of the people who were closest to him in that year, and he used the phrase: Trust is hard to earn and easy to lose. And talk about losing, I lost it. I just lost it. I got up from my seat and I went into the bathroom, and I cried for 10 minutes, and my husband was waiting for me outside and I said, I'm done, I can't do this anymore, and I walked out the door and we left Mars Hill.

Mike Cosper: I have a friend who often says, We become what we tolerate. Nowhere is this more true than in our churches. For the crime of suggesting that it might be a good idea to have older, wiser men gathered around a pastor in his early thirties, Karen Schaeffer was called a heretic, pushed out of her job, and then shamed from the pulpit on a Sunday. But the wheels on the church bus just kept turning. The fallout for her didn't stop there though. Her son who had returned to the faith at Mars Hill stayed after she left. He became an elder, and the church was a point of tension in their family for a long time. Her younger son did leave Mars Hill, but he hasn't really returned to church at all, ever since.

45 MIN

For many conservative evangelicals, Mark's turn away from Emergent was hailed as a victory, but beneath the surface, relationships were severed in an instant and he showed a willingness to pivot almost on a dime about major issues. Tim Conder was among those young leaders in the mid nineties, when Mark was a part of that group. In hindsight, his early impressions of Mark proved all too true.

Tim Conder: There was a bit of a chameleoness in Mark because the goal at some level was that large church. And the impact of that - I don't want to make it all negative, the impact of a large church. But also his role as a dominating leader on a scale where he was noticed. Life for example, we said this going all the way back to '97 again, and said this often over the next two or three years, That guy is going to have a spectacular fall.

Mike Cosper: Karen Schaeffer was one of the first to discover that underneath the bravado and the confidence, the pious talk about mission and the kingdom of God, was a hair-trigger, ready to fire the second there was any perceived threat to power or control of the church. She wouldn't be the last one to hear that gun go off.

Mike Cosper: Thanks for listening. If you're enjoying the show, leave us a rating and review in iTunes. It'll help other people find this. Even better than that, subscribe to CT Magazine today. Subscriptions are the best way to support this kind of journalism from CT.

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, sound design, and mixing by Kate Siefker. Our theme song is Sticks and Stones by Kings Kaleidoscope. The closing song this week is Did I Tell You the Bullet's Still There, by Bill Mallonee. Graphic design by Bryan Todd. Social media by Nicole Shanks. Editorial consulting by Andrea Palpant Dilley. CT's editor in chief is Timothy Dalrymple.

Come back next week, where we look at an aspect of Mars Hill's approach to church planting that was truly signature for them. The episode is titled, I am Jack's Raging Bile Duct. We'll see you then.