



# Aftermath

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What happens to your faith when your church is torn apart?

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## SHOW NOTES

Five days after resigning as lead pastor of Mars Hill Church, Mark Driscoll was once again in front of a crowd—this time, a packed conference of pastors who offered him a standing ovation in support. It only took 474 days for him to announce he was planting a new church in Scottsdale, Arizona.

But while Driscoll wielded his own force of personality to get as much distance from Mars Hill as possible, life in Seattle was a different story. A confused and hurting church was displaced, hundreds of people were out of their jobs, and the fiercest critics of the church practically threw a party.

In our series finale, we follow a few of those threads, which led some people to new ministries, others to new careers, and still others out of the church altogether. We'll revisit the legacy of Driscoll's teaching on gender, and we'll ask whether or not he really preached good news and freedom.

We'll also look for the presence of Christ, working in surprising and unseen ways to bring beauty out of the ashes of what was once Mars Hill Church.

## MASTHEAD

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

Executive Producer: Erik Petrik

Producer, Writer, Editor, Host, and Mix Engineer: Mike Cospers

Additional Editing: Resonate Recordings and Matt Linder

Associate Producer: Joy Beth Smith

Music and Sound Design: Kate Siefker and Mike Cospers

Graphic Design: Bryan Todd

Social Media: Morgan Lee and Kara Bettis

Editorial Consultant: Andrea Palpant Dilley

Editor in Chief: Timothy Dalrymple

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Closing song: “All My Favorite People” by Over the Rhine

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Transcription: Cheryl Penner


Transcript Design: Alecia Sharp

## TRANSCRIPT

 @MikeCasper


**Mike Cospers:** October 20th, 2014, five days after Mark Driscoll's resignation appeared in the pages of Religion News Service, a team of shell-shocked board members, pastors, staff, and lay leaders are scrambling to determine how they might care for the few thousand people who are still around, still struggling with faith and doubt, marriage and divorce, births and deaths.

Meanwhile, a few thousand miles away in Texas, Pastor Robert Morris is on the stage at the Gateway Conference, in a room with a few thousand people to talk about a scheduling change. That change happened because Mark Driscoll had withdrawn from speaking at the conference. Morris talked about his personal relationship with Mark, and he said not to trust everything that you read on the internet.

 @PsRobertMorris

**Robert Morris:** He did make some mistakes. Now, here's what I figure. We've got two choices. One is we could crucify him, but since someone's already been crucified for him, the other choice is we could restore him with the spirit of gentleness, considering ourselves, lest we are also tempted. And it's very sad that in the church, we're the only army that shoots at our wounded. And I want you to stop it. I really do. Thank you. I'd like for you to show your love for him, and I'd like for you to just welcome him. Mark, would you stand up? This is Mark Driscoll.

**Mike Cospers:** There's a level at which I get the spirit of this and appreciate it. The church should be a place marked by grace. But one must marvel at the fact that while a church of thousands in Seattle is in a collapse spiral, the guy at the center of it, a guy who's been found responsible for years of unresolved conflict and broken relationships, somehow he gets treated as the victim in a room full of pastors and ends up invited on stage to tell his story.

 @PastorMark

**Mark Driscoll:** Thank you, Pastor Robert. What do you want me to do? If you give a microphone to a preacher who's been gone for a while, he could go for a long time.

**Mike Cospers:** There's incredible power in storytelling, Driscoll harnessed it throughout his years at Mars Hill, and starting right then, five days after resigning, he began to harness it again. In the 474 days that followed, he'd make about a dozen strategic appearances at conferences, special events, interviews. And during that time, he'd dial in an account of what happened at Mars Hill, that won the sympathy of pastors and helped skeptics put their guard down.

**Megachurch Pastor 1:** And Pastor Mark had to go through a very difficult, kind of almost a public trial, with the media on his front lawn, helicopters...

**Megachurch Pastor 2:** And I believe Mark Driscoll has been completely mistreated by former staff people and by our media, and I want to support Mark and his family here today.

**Megachurch Pastor 3:** And Pastor Jimmy got up and delivered a powerful, prophetic word to Pastor Mark. And the prophetic word was this: You've been a brother to many. The next season that you're gonna move into is you're gonna transition from a brother to a father.

**Mark Driscoll:** We had an eight year conflict that really went public the last year, but it's been eight years. And some of you are shepherds and know what that's like. By the time everybody else knows, you've already been dealing with it for a long time.

What a year. And we had a conflict that went public after about seven years. It really went public for the final year and just was an insane, crazy, difficult...

**Mike Cospes:** For 474 days he told that story. And then February 1st, 2016, he posted a video on YouTube.

**Mark Driscoll:** Howdy, Pastor Mark Driscoll here with my best friend, 28 years running, my wife, Grace. And we have a big announcement. At least it's big for us and for our family. We have moved to Phoenix, making new friends, and excited about...

**Mike Cospes:** He talks about healing up. And while he doesn't say the words fresh start, it's the undercurrent for the whole video.

**Mark Driscoll:** And so Lord willing, we're hoping, trusting, praying, planning, and also a little bit worrying about planting a church here in early 2016. The name of the church will be the Trinity Church. You can find out more...

**Mike Cospes:** This is the aftermath story for Mark Driscoll and his family.

The Trinity Church launched in the fall of 2016. He rebuilt an online platform, expanding the Real Marriage brand into Real Faith. There were a number of families that followed him to Phoenix, but for the most part, the experience of former Mars Hill members, elders and staff has been one of unresolved brokenness and grief.

5 MIN

We're not going to dive deeply into the story of the Trinity Church or Driscoll's ministry in the intervening years. The primary reason is that this podcast is about Mars Hill, and when Mark left, in many ways, his story at the church ended, though his legacy in the scattering community would echo for years.

There's no shortage of coverage on Trinity Church, though, as Warren Throckmorton and Julie Roys, amongst many others, have continued to cover Driscoll in the intervening time. That said, there are a couple of elements of the Trinity Church story that are hard to ignore if you want to understand what happened in Seattle in the years to come.

The first one simply being that Scottsdale Mark is a very different person than Seattle Mark.

**Mark Driscoll:** I don't even... I don't hold to the five points of Calvinism, I think it's garbage, because it's not biblical. But nonetheless, that whole Young, Restless, Reformed, God is Father, but He's distant, He's mean, He's cruel, He's non relational, He's far away. So then they picked dead mentors.

**Matt Brown:** Right.

[@PastorMattBrown](#)

**Mark Driscoll:** Spurgeon, Calvin Luther. These are little boys with father wounds who are looking for spiritual fathers, so they pick dead guys who are not gonna actually get to know them or correct them.

**Mike Cospers:** In that short clip, Mark manages to repudiate most of his books, much of his preaching, and Acts 29, the reformed church planning network he helped launch and lead for nearly 20 years. It's an illustration of something that many from Mars Hill have described - this feeling they experienced in the aftermath of the church's collapse, that went beyond just brokenness and loss of relationship. But a real feeling that as Mark walked away from the community, he poured out kerosene and lit a match.

There's one other thing I'll say about Trinity, and there's a related story to tell. To some, it's a bit like a ghost, a specter of what used to be. It's not entirely the same, not entirely different, but certainly has a shared essence, a shared soul, if you will. So it haunts them. And some have gone down to face the ghost. When Trinity celebrated its five year anniversary this fall, one former Mars Hill member decided to do just that.

**Benjamin Petry:** I literally had zero interest in Trinity, and then just the idea popped into my head: Well, maybe you should just write a Google review. And so as I was thinking of this idea, I was like, Well, I've never been so it really wouldn't be in good faith to write a review of a place you haven't been, and so I was like, Well, obviously I have to go. And so I they checked their website and it told... They told me I was invited to their five-year anniversary.

**Mike Cospers:** This was like the banner on the front page or something, You're invited?

**Benjamin Petry:** It is a banner on the front page. Banner on the front page said, You're invited. So I was like, Okay, invitation accepted.

**Mike Cospers:** This was definitely going to be a moment of facing ghosts. In his statements after his resignation, Driscoll dated the church's internal conflicts to 2007, and we covered the events of that fall in Episode Seven, titled State of Emergency. There were governance changes that year, but they didn't result in lasting conflict. They crushed conflict by crushing two people who raised questions about the changes. One of those fired pastors was Bent Meyer. The other was Paul Petry. In continuing his appeals, Paul's conflict with Driscoll and other senior leaders continued to escalate to the point where in December he and his family were kicked out of the church, and the pastors told their members to treat them as unrepentant believers, and shun them. For most who loved Mars Hill, the work of making sense of its collapse began in 2014. But for the Meyers and the Petry's, it began seven years earlier. The voice you just heard was Benjamin Petry, Paul's son. He was only seven years old when these events took place, but his childhood was indelibly marked by them.

**Benjamin Petry:** I had the urge to go and experience what I experienced and what my family experienced. I knew it was gonna be a trip in more ways than one.

**Mike Cospers:** Long before the church closed its doors, his family was living in shadows cast by its ghost. So in September of this year, in response to a web banner inviting him

10 MIN

to an anniversary party at Trinity Church, Benjamin Petry headed to Scottsdale, to look that ghost in the eyes.

From Christianity today, This is Mike Cospers, and you're listening to the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. Our series finale is about what happens after a church that thousands called home, came face to face with frailty and failure, and then collapsed overnight.

It's about waking up to loss and disillusionment, and still it's a story about looking in the rubble for the fingerprints of God, a God who wept in the garden and at the grave of a friend, who leaves the ninety nine for the one, and who promises justice to the wounded and oppressed. Today's episode, Episode 12, Aftermath.

Almost all of the first seven years of Benjamin's life were defined by Mars Hill. His parents were just so deeply invested, and the pain and shock of 2007, suddenly and irrationally losing your job, your vocation, your community of faith, and most of your friends, affected the entire family for years to come.

**Benjamin Petry:** There was just...There was just a lot of passive abandonment. What does that do to your parents, but then how does what happens to your parents get processed from a family perspective. And that type of experience, my type of upbringing, I think, is like something that it's very hard to put into words.

**Mike Cospers:** It was hard for Paul Petry to put any of this into words too. In fact, it was hard for most people I spoke with to verbalize the kind of wounding that happens in spiritual communities, including counselors, and those wounds can go on to wreak havoc for years. It seems that for Benjamin, because so much of this happened when he was so young, it was almost like there was an empty place in the house or a missing piece of the family's collective memory that he wanted to see and fill in for himself.

**Benjamin Petry:** I didn't really have any expectations. I just had the urge to go and experience what I experienced, and in a way, maybe get a glimpse into what my older siblings experienced and what my family experienced, and the type of guy that a lot of people had their spirituality interlocked with.

**Mike Cospers:** He flew into Phoenix on Sunday morning, September 12th, and ended up attending the 9 and 11 o'clock services. People were very friendly, but there wasn't much about the services that surprised him: Long sermon, loud music, high dollar production. Not Benjamin's cup of tea, but he was there, he was in the room.

Paul Petry told me this story when it happened, and when we got off our call, he sent me a link to where Benjamin had written about it at length on Facebook. What struck me about the whole post though, was the photograph. He'd taken a selfie in front of Trinity Church and there was something about it that struck me as meaningful, but it was just a fragment of an idea at the time.

It's an interesting photo, and he's an interesting subject. He's tall, 6'2", thin, and has long, black hair. Paul had told me that Benjamin had done some modeling as well, so I asked him about the picture and the getup he was wearing, when we talked a few weeks later.

**Benjamin Petry:** Yeah. I'm like, I would say like a mix, I would say like a young Ozzy for sure. I've got young Ozzy mixed with Clint Eastwood. I had this black cowboy hat on and I had this black handkerchief on my side. So I looked like a character.

**Mike Cospers:** After I interviewed Benjamin. I pulled the photo up again, and when I saw it that second time, I thought about all the Petry's had lost over the years, and all the labor of rebuilding their faith, family and friendships. And the more I thought about it, the more significance I read into that moment. For Benjamin to be standing there outside Trinity Church, it couldn't have been just a prank even if that had been his intention. It was too loaded with meaning, too informed by years of loss and loneliness, too weighed down by the burden a kid feels when they see their parents suffer.

That time, as I looked at the all black attire, the hat, the scarf, the aviator sunglasses, it felt like he was suiting up. And then a quote came to mind that had been floating there for weeks. It's a line from HBO's *The Watchmen*, where a character named Laurie Blake is talking about why certain heroes wear masks. She says, People who wear masks are driven by trauma, they're obsessed with justice because of some injustice they suffered when they were kids, ergo, the mask, it hides the pain. Benjamin was suited up, and not just to encounter a world that felt like Mars Hill again, or to sit through Driscoll's preaching.

**Benjamin Petry:** The other point that I didn't touch on of going was to maybe bring some kind of reconciliation between my dad and Mark. There was a part of me that was like, Well, maybe I can initiate some kind of phone call between Mark and my dad. And looking back at this, yes, I think it's extremely naive that I thought that. But at the same time, like, what was the worst that could happen?

15 MIN

**Mike Cospers:** At the end of the second service, he made his way to the lobby, chatting up people around him, including the security guards. He never gave a fake name or anything like that. There was no guile. Eventually, Mark made his way out there too to say hello to the people who'd waited to meet him.

**Benjamin Petry:** And then he saw me and we were shaking hands, and he was like, Oh, that Benjamin. I don't know if he said that exactly, but that was like the idea. He recognized who I was. And I just told him, Hey, I came down to see your church. Yeah, told him I was there for the anniversary and I... And I never realized this, but yeah, I don't know how tall Mark is, but I was definitely looking down at him. But I was just looking in his eyes and I just was like, Hey, there were a lot of things that happened in the past that weren't entirely, but I would say were largely, were largely influenced by you, and I would just really appreciate if you gave my dad a phone call and just told him you're sorry for a few things that happened. Like, very, very non-confrontational. But yeah, he got extremely nervous and I don't think he really knew what to do. Like, he was in shock. And he kept talking with me and he was like, Well, your dad, there were some things. And like now looking back at it, I'm not surprised at all, but at the time I was just like, Are you serious, come on, man.

**Mike Cospers:** It wasn't long before Mark was ushered away, and Benjamin headed out too, accompanied by a security guard.

**Benjamin Petry:** When I was leaving, there was a guy who came out with me and it was the same guy who came in with me, and I was just like, Do you have any family involved here? And he was like, Yeah. And I was like, Well, you might wanna think twice about that.

**Mike Cospers:** I wanted to start with this story because I think it brings to life a journey that many have made in more quiet ways since the collapse of Mars Hill. It begins with the discovery that there's something unwelcome in our hearts and minds. Call them shadows or ghosts. Or if that scares you, think of them as squirrels in the attic. They might fill you with fear about certain relationships. They might be beliefs or doctrines you've left unexamined. They could be questions you're afraid to ask, maybe even questions about the role you played in an unhealthy organization. Whatever they are, they haunt you. They drive your anxiety, their unfinished business in the aftermath of the collapse of your community, and the scariest realization is they might have been there for a long, long time.

There's an aspect of Benjamin Petry's story that's a little bit like the work of the holy fools in Christian literature. Doing the thing that looks plain, obvious, frightening or naive, and just showing up. Maybe even showing up looking like Ozzy Osbourne, and just asking someone who's deeply wounded you and your family to consider reaching out for reconciliation.

It's the lighthearted spirit of the holy fool. The very thing that causes us not to take them seriously, that enables them to surprise us with their wisdom.

**Benjamin Petry:** Facing Mark and leaving Mark was a very powerful thing for me, cuz this is something that not only ideologically what Trinity represents, but who Mark is, was such a big part of pain for my family, but going and experiencing this and then leaving it was, I think, very healing. Yeah, spiritually healing.

**Mike Cospers:** Mark had been a ghost in his life for 14 years, and in a symbolic way, he took charge. He chose to enter Driscoll's world, he chose to confront him, and he chose to leave. It makes me think of a line in Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, a story set in the devastated post apocalyptic world. There's a moment when the man, the main character, muses to himself about the fireside routine he's created for him and his son. He says it feels like some ancient anointing. So be it, McCarthy writes, evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else, construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them.

I would guess that Benjamin Petry is not the only person who, after losing or being cut off from spiritual community, constructed a ceremony out of the air and breathed upon it and found a little bit of freedom.

**Mike Cospers:** At about the same time that Mark Driscoll was receiving a standing ovation at the Gateway Conference, pastors of the remaining Mars Hill congregations, as well as a number of staff and board members, were looking at a dire financial situation and determining what came next.

While producing this podcast, I found that there's more than a little curiosity, and even suspicion, about what happened with the church's finances after Mars Hill closed, and



it's a reasonable question. Giving in 2013 had amounted to 20 million dollars, so when the church shut down, what happened to all the money and the property? This brings us to a subject that may leave some at the edge of their seats, but certainly won't everybody. So let's talk about accounting and real estate, and we'll do what we can to keep it interesting.

The decision was made to launch 11 of the sites as church plants, but it wasn't like the board could hand out churches like Oprah Winfrey.

Oprah Winfrey: You get a car, you get a car, you get a car!

**Mike Cosper:** It wasn't like that at all. Resources were scarce, the church was very leveraged, and the whole thing was really complicated. The church began the year with 14 campuses, a massive staff and a very expensive media ministry. Throughout 2014, attendance and giving declined and several people familiar with the numbers said that the week after Acts 29 kicked Mark out, it dropped by almost 50%. There were layoffs, cutbacks, and firings all year long. But that couldn't offset the lost income. Some of the church's properties were mortgaged, so transferring them to the new church was complicated. The lender had made an arrangement with a church of 15,000 people. These new churches were all under a thousand with no banking history or credit. Other churches were leasing their properties, and some of the leases stretched far into the future, creating similar challenges as a mortgage for the dramatically smaller churches.

There were a ton of other details, stuff you'd never think of, like copier leases that became six figure liabilities and were almost ironclad. There were civil and criminal lawsuits from former members, accusing the church and its executive elders of mismanagement of funds. The cases were all eventually dismissed as having no legal merit. But the legal expenses incurred by Mars Hill Church were significant.

Managing all of this was Kerry Dodd, the church's CFO, and Caleb Walters, the Director of Real Estate Development, who became the Chief of Operations at the end of 2014. They would be the last two people employed by Mars Hill Church. Dodd couldn't be reached for the podcast, but I spoke to Caleb Walters and he walked me through the big picture of the dissolution. In the end, it was all pretty straightforward. A formula for distribution of assets was developed based on each church's attendance and giving in the previous year, and this formula was shared with each of the churches at the beginning of 2015. From there, they made sure each church got its fair share, whether that meant property, prepayments on a lease so it could be transferred, or cash.

When Walters was initially asked by the board to stay and help manage the process, he resisted, but he ended up committing when he saw it as a gospel motivated project: Breaking up Mars Hill as efficiently as possible to maximize what each of the new churches could start with, and to try to allow as many churches as possible to stay in their current locations. But pulling that off required a juggling act, selling buildings that wouldn't be used by the new churches, renegotiating loans and leases, and countless other details. They weren't entirely alone, though. A team came together that Walters described as some of the best minds in commercial real estate in the Pacific Northwest, and had a number of lenders and landlords entered negotiations eager to help these

new churches. On one occasion, a single real estate liability was significant enough that had they simply paid it off from the church's remaining assets, it would've left nothing for the 11 new churches, but an individual donor covered that expense

For Walters and Dodd, though, the day in, day out was grueling work. They were the only two people working out of a massive warehouse, surrounded every day by the empty husk of a community that they'd been a part of just months before. But as Walters described it to me, he's proud of the work. They were charged with being good stewards of what was left of the church. They did so by equipping 11 church plants, and they were witnesses to ongoing gospel-inspired generosity. Generosity that came in spite of the loss, frustration and cynicism that would naturally emerge after the church closed its doors. It took more than a year to finish that work, and because of the extent of their debt and the diminished cash reserves, the final distribution felt by many to be less than they'd hoped for or anticipated.

But there was one other significant expense in the mix. After the sale of the Ballard building in 2015, Mark Driscoll was paid the equivalent of one year's salary, a severance. His salary at that time was \$650,000 a year.

 @aaroncgray

**Aaron Gray:** The decision was finalized in early November and announced sometime in November.

**Mike Cosper:** This is Aaron Gray. He pastored Mars Hill Shoreline, which became Sound City Bible church.

**Aaron Gray:** So we went from giant megachurch, fastest growing, influential, et cetera, et cetera, to we're gonna plant out churches at about a six- or seven-week timeline.

**Mike Cosper:** Planting the new churches happened before most of the sales of the buildings and renegotiations of leases were finished for Mars Hill, so the 11 church plants were flying blind a little bit. They were discouraged from raising direct funds for the new churches, because they were still covering overhead for their facilities and staff through the end of the year. Meanwhile, they're supposed to launch on January 1st and they're scrambling to put the pieces together for it. All of this on the heels of the stress and controversy of 2014. Several of the church planters, including Aaron, had been part of the investigation and had spent hundreds of hours in grueling interviews and discussions about the fate of the church, so it's not as though they came into this work with a lot of fuel in the tank.

25 MIN

**Aaron Gray:** Like it was borderline terrifying in that six or seven weeks. But again, the pace was so fast, I don't even think I had time to be terrified. It's like, Alright, how do I file... How do I file nonprofit paperwork with the state of Washington, how do we get set up with an accounting company, who's gonna be on the team, who's gonna do this or that, what's the name of the church itself gonna be? All that sort of stuff was, again, frenzied pace, already being exhausted, already being depleted in many ways, and now it's like, Well, let's launch out. There was excitement around it, there was invigoration around it because doing a new thing is exciting oftentimes. But it was pretty wild.

**Mike Cosper:** Of the 11 churches started in January, 2015, nine of them are still in existence, including Sound City Bible Church. Two of them eventually merged with other churches.

One of many interesting stories is what happened with Mars Hill Spokane, pastored by Miles Rohde. In 2014, it was basically just a core group and by many accounts should have shut down, but there was a desire on the part of many to try and make it work and keep it alive, and two of the closed campuses eventually sent over audio equipment and kids ministry supplies to help it get off the ground. They had a shell of a building and enough money for a few months' operating expenses, and when that ran out, three of the former Mars Hill churches committed to supporting them, and did so for two years. They'll celebrate seven years together as a church in January.


Those 11 weren't the only ones to come out of Mars Hill, though. Several of the pastors who'd left earlier, having resigned or been fired for raising concerns, ended up planting without any support from the closing church.

Nick Bogardus left in 2013 and planted Cross of Christ in Orange County, where he served until January of 2021, when pressures from the COVID pandemic led he and some other pastors in the area to merge their churches, and he stepped away.

Tim Gaydos planted a Seattle church in 2014, and pastored there with Tyler Gorsline until 2019, when he left to start a nonprofit called Together Washington.

Ryan Welsh, one of the Noble Nine who wrote a letter in August, 2014, planted Redeemer East Side with Gary Shavey.

Drew Hensley, who was the only campus pastor to sign the letter from the Noble Nine, planted Redemption Church with another signatory of that letter, Ryan Kearns. Here's Ryan Kearns.

 @Ryan\_kearns

**Ryan Kearns:** Just imagine if there was like a massive earthquake inside of an area, and then afterward you just have a bunch of people walking around disoriented. And so here was a spiritual earthquake where a church just came crumbling down, and then you've got 10 to 15,000 people walking around, just disoriented, trying to figure out what's happening.

And so I felt like it was our job to stay. In some ways, I'd been a part of the end of Mars Hill, and we named the church Redemption because probably the biggest lie and the most felt thing that people had at the end was that God was done with Seattle, that there were never gonna be better days for the gospel in Seattle. I really sensed that defeatedness, and so it was just a chance for us to remember that God's still gonna do redemption. He's still gonna redeem people, He's still gonna change lives. We can mourn what was lost, but we can also realize that God's not done, that God still loves this place, and He still loves us as a people.

 @drewchensley

**Drew Hensley:** Yeah, we came to a place where both of our families...We said we believe we should stay.


**Mike Cospers:** That's Drew Hensley.

**Drew Hensley:** Not in a savior mentality of like, we need to save these people who don't have a church anymore, but we had built up a crazy amount of relationships and there was still a gap in Seattle for gospel-centered churches. I don't think there's ever gonna be too many gospel-centered churches in Seattle.

We knew we were gonna be in some ways, a bit of a triage center for the first several months, if not year, if not more, for people who needed to walk out some healing and restoration and reestablishment of faith, and then taking some of our past experience and not throwing the baby out with the bath water. It's like, no, we're still reformed, gospel-centered, this is what we believe. But we started the...I guess the church officially started like January of 2015.

**Mike Cospers:** Along with people like Drew and Ryan, there were others who found themselves flying without a net after leaving Mars Hill, and those stories go back for several years. Some of these people had been at the church since they were fresh out of college, some even younger, and they either didn't have much on their resume or hadn't been working anywhere else for a long time. It meant their whole career was tied up at Mars Hill. Some of the pastors had networks in ministry that led to other work, some didn't. Some were so burned out that they just wanted out.


Mike Anderson and Jesse Bryan had worked in media and communications, and neither had any desire to go to work for another church. Here's Mike Anderson.

 @mikeyanderson

**Mike Anderson:** We have no money and we gotta support our family. And so we started...We basically went and got contracts to do, like, website design and stuff, and figured out how to do it, and we went and started a few companies and went with whichever one was able to pay us. Like, for a lot of that time, I had multiple jobs.

**Mike Cospers:** And part of the obstacle was Mars Hill itself. Jesse referred to it as the Enron of churches, because it had so many negative associations with it in the city.

30 MIN

 @jessebryan

**Jesse Bryan:** So a friend of mine who is - I won't use his name - has a very robust background in music and publishing and stuff like that. And there was a job opening at a large company in Redmond to do music publishing for the video game platform that they had. Now, this job this person was applying for was like entry level compared to the things he'd been doing for years. When he came into the meeting with the person doing the interview, the person looked at his resume and said, MH Music. And he's Like, Uh, yeah. Cuz he didn't wanna put Mars Hill music, he put MH Music. And he goes, Is that Mars Hill Music? And the guy said, Yes. The person that was doing the interview stood up and walked out. And my friend sat in that room by himself for 15 minutes, realized no one was coming back, stood up, walked out of that room and tried to find his way out of the building. It was that bad. You were unemployable. It's game over. And by the way, remember that whole thing about how we all had mortgages and children, that didn't help, because now you're over a barrel and you gotta figure out... I gotta figure out how to build something out of nothing, fast. Mark got to leave; the rest of us didn't. We had to pay the price and the repercussions, and most of us are gonna be

paying for it probably the rest of our lives. Good news is we still all were friends and we figured it out.

**Mike Cospers:** Out of that scramble, Mike and Jesse, along with two other co-founders, Jake Johnson and John Ashcroft, founded Belief Agency, a creative agency and story consultancy that's grown to work with brands that are household names. Because of agreements with those brands, we're not sharing the names here, but it truly is a remarkable story of entrepreneurial grit and survival.

**Jesse Bryan:** When we got the business going, we literally used all of our money to try to help people get out of there and have something on their resume so they could get jobs. And we did that for years.

**Mike Anderson:** Because it really was like, We gotta escape this thing.

**Jesse Bryan:** The reason why we have never talked about these things is cuz if we talked about them, this could ruin all of our lives again. The stakes could not have been higher. And I'm shocked, I'm just shocked that, like, I'm just shocked it worked. It's crazy. The amount of times we were this close to death is nuts.

**Mike Cospers:** And this season wasn't just about financial survival. They were also watching the church they'd poured their lives into melt down, people leaving or getting fired, scandals emerging almost daily towards the end.

**Mike Anderson:** We're all deconstructing at, like, in real time, every day. Like every morning we get to work and go for walks and figure out what's going on. It was a lot. I think I'm still escaping Mars Hill. Honestly, for real, it is still an active escaping from it every month, and sometimes it's every day.

**Mike Cospers:** That word, deconstruction, comes up a lot when you start talking to people who were part of Mars Hill, and for many, including Mike and Jesse, the whole concept of deconstruction wasn't an abstraction. It wasn't something that happened out of reactivity against Mark. It was a real time experience, and it happened because you were watching this community, and the people who were part of it, fall apart around you.

**Jesse Bryan:** You know how many times we were like, These people are gonna shoot themselves. They were unwinding people's lives. And these were all men that like a year before... No, a year and a half before, I would say are probably the best dads and friends I know. And now they're smoking two packs of cigarettes a day, drinking at work, and talking about shooting themselves. That's how fast it happened. They were beautiful people and they were absolutely wrecked. Absolutely.

**Mike Cospers:** I think Joe Day describes how you find yourself in this place, pretty well. He was at the church from 1999 to 2004, and served mostly with Mars Hill Music.

**Joe Day:** I was coming to see that I had been involved in a toxic culture for a very long period of time. I couldn't untangle... The theology, the methods, and even just the whole outlook on, like, mission in church was all tangled up within that, and it was

 @joeday

really hard to know what was what. And so that basically started the process for me of really, A, okay, I'm starting to go through a deep faith crisis. And I realized, Okay, this is where I'm at, I can't ignore it, and neither can I just pray it away. So yeah, I started going through some counseling, which has been great, a lot of deconstruction. Today trying to, like... In the end of it, I think there's so much [CENSORED] in evangelicalism, I think that we're getting so many things backwards. But for me, what I look at is I just bring it back to Christ. As I've tried to untangle everything, where I've landed is everything else might be wrong, but the person of Christ is still extremely compelling to me.

**Paul David Tripp:** I think there are two things we need to do. We need to understand the experience of deconstructors.

**Mike Cospser:** This is Paul David Tripp. Paul was on the board from late 2013 until the end of July, 2014, and worked during that time to try and bring about reconciliation and restoration inside Mars Hill.

**Paul David Tripp:** We should understand the trauma of these experiences. But I wanna say something else: We should all be deconstructing our faith. We better do it. Because our faith becomes a culture, a culture so webbed into the purity of truth, it's hard to separate the two. And we better do some deconstructing or we're gonna find ourselves again and again in these sad places. For me, I've accepted the fact that I'm gonna be a sad man for the rest of my life, because I get calls all the time, the saddest things that are happening in the church. And you know, I celebrate the Church of Jesus Christ. I celebrate the places where it's a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. I love the gospel. I have no other wisdom than that. But I'm sad for the church. And I'm sad we've become so loyal to this culture, we're afraid to deconstruct in places where it's lost its way, it's harmful. It's producing things that allow the world to mock and cause young people to walk away, and leaders not to be rescued from themselves, and ministries explode. And so there is a devastating humility that comes when you're really... you're willing to deconstruct something you've given your life to. I mean that in a positive sense. I'm not talking about apostasy here. But willing to step back and say, Where do we just need to take this apart? Abandon our loyalty, stand with courage and say, This is not good enough.

**Mike Cospser:** There's a question that started to take shape for me late last fall, when I was only a few months into researching and interviewing for this podcast, and it's related to what Paul is saying here.

As I've said before, I was at just the right age and at the right place in life to encounter Driscoll just as he was hitting his cultural moment. In the years that followed, Driscoll made his way from this guy on the fringes, a guy who was too much of a fundamentalist to be emergent, and too edgy and vulgar to be an evangelical, to a guy who was embraced in the mainstream, especially within new Calvinist circles. And the language that you heard in those circles more and more over the years, was the language of gospel-centered. In fact, some of the justification for his embrace in those circles was that in spite of his faults, in spite of whatever else went wrong, he preached the gospel, so he was part of the tribe.

For me, that idea was baked in. In fact, 20 years ago, when I first encountered him, the

talk that he gave in an overcrowded breakout at a conference called Solarize, was titled simply, The Gospel.

**Mark Driscoll:** In a world that is filled with noise and opinions and conjectures, you're gonna have to just grab people by the balls, and you're gonna have to swing 'em around and you're gonna have to get their attention. And you're not gonna do that with a film clip. I preach for an hour to an hour and a half. I do it five times on Sunday. One of the reasons I'm sick is I blew my voice out on Sunday, yelling at my people. People need preaching.

**Mike Cospers:** But as I looked back over the past year, looked at what took place in the church, listened to people's stories as they described how their lives were affected by the collapse, and listened to hour upon hour of his preaching and lectures, I began to think more and more about this term, gospel-centered, and even about the idea that Mark preached the gospel.

The word gospel simply means good news, and I found myself asking, What was the good news that Mark preached.

**Mark Driscoll:** And those of you men who are here, and your wives are suffering under your folly and failure, shame on you. And shame on you if you say you're a Christian, and shame on you if you've been attending Mars Hill. And shame on you if you've been surrounded by good men and have pursued none of them. And shame on you if you've not become a member and submitted to spiritual authority. And shame on you if you've not joined a community group, so you can walk in darkness. And shame on you if you show up to put communion in your hands.

**Mike Cospers:** This is the same sermon where you've famously heard Mark scream week after week:

**Mark Driscoll:** How dare you?! Who in the hell do you think you are?!

40 MIN

**Mike Cospers:** We included that in the credits, and I wanted to talk about it here for a reason. Because while it's not an example of him openly screaming at someone in a meeting, it is an example of a spirit that I think pervaded his teaching, and that infected the leadership culture in the church. It is an outlier in the sense that his yelling rarely hit those decibels on Sundays, but I think you'll find the core message is pretty consistent all the way through the Mars Hill story. As one former member put it to me, That message was, You suck, do better, do like me. There's often an intense emphasis in his preaching on behavior, and this case is a fascinating example because while the anger in one sense has its roots on these comments about men taking advantage of women, he's also just as heavy-handed about the formal membership process of the church, about joining a community group, and about submitting to the elders' authority.

And as we covered, when we talked about this on a previous episode, he goes on moments later to announce that the church is passing a plate during the service for the very first time, and adds another rebuke and another imperative on the church for their giving.

**Mark Driscoll:** We have people who come to this church every week, they don't worship. They take, they don't participate. We will pass the plate. If you're disconnected, please fill out the visitor card.

**Mike Cosper:** You could supplement these clips with hundreds more. Some of them, his most famous jokes, mocking young guys who live in their mom's basement, going off about the culture of objectification, making fun of liberals and progressives in Seattle, and on and on it goes. But beneath the punchline of any of these jokes is usually an imperative of some sort, something along the lines of: Man up, grow up, pull it together, give, serve.

I'm not saying Mark never preached the forgiveness of sin; he certainly did, and there's no doubt that people came to authentic faith in Jesus at Mars Hill. But there are different ways of experiencing forgiveness, and different ways of talking about it. There's a forgiveness that says, I'm not gonna hold a grudge against you about that thing you did; and there's a deeper forgiveness that says, I'm not gonna hold the fact that you are a sinner against you, I'm adopting you as my child, and you're loved unconditionally. I don't think you can argue about the fact that Mark preached about how God forgave sinners, but I do think we can look at the life he invited his followers into, and see it shaped by something other than God's unconditional love and mercy.



**David Zahl:** What happens oftentimes is people hear some recognition of how hard things are, and frankly, some of the things they've been hiding about themselves and they finally feel permission to be honest.

**Mike Cosper:** This is David Zahl. David's a pastor and author, and the founder of Mockingbird, and he's also someone who I think has a really fine-tuned sense for all the ways we set obstacles between us and the grace of God.

**David Zahl:** And then they hear the message of grace, which is life shattering, and extremely exciting that my past might be wiped away in some way that is true. But then what happens is you bring the law back in, so it becomes a kind of a law, grace, law, is the way that we would normally put it. The disposition that comes through is this very, sort of, Get better, to try harder, to pull themselves together. Eventually, what you'll have is what you have in every other element of the culture, which is burnout. You'll have people who wake up one day and be like, Hey, this isn't actually working.

**Mike Cosper:** So I wanna come back to this question. I asked a few moments ago: What was the good news at Mars Hill? Was it a story about the mercy of God, for the people of God, who came like beggars and were never turned away? Or was the story being told about a certain way of life that leads to happiness and prosperity, that if you follow this path, a path defined by Mark, defined by gender, of course, that you'll have a happy marriage, obedient children, and a successful career. That as a member of Mars Hill, you were part of a chosen elite, standing in contrast to the city of Seattle. Not only that, standing in contrast to other churches with a weak Jesus or boring pastors or shallow theology or bad music.

In Luke 18, Jesus describes two men who come to the temple to pray. One, a Pharisee,



the other, a tax collector. The Pharisee thanks God that he's not like other men, adulterers and evil doers, and yes, that tax collector over there. He then adds that he's grateful his spiritual and financial life are both in order. The tax collector stands far off, though. He beats his chest and he just says, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. And Jesus tells His audience that it's the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who walks away justified.

It's worth asking: Did the good news preached at Mars Hill sound more like the prayer of the Pharisee or the tax collector? Was it more a celebration of God's mercy, or was it a temple to a certain way of life, that wasn't just about living in contrast to the surrounding city, but conquering it. And if it did sound more like the Pharisee, what does that say about the power of that message, the distance it was able to reach, and the power it had in the lives of its people. What does it say about our religious ambitions, our desire to be right, our desire to be on that winning team?

45 MIN

Robert Cavin once wrote, We hate this parable because it says plainly that it's the nightmare which is the truth of our condition. We fear the tax collector's acceptance because we know precisely what it means. It means that we'll never be free until we're dead to the whole business of justifying ourselves.

**David Zahl:** If the ultimate message comes across is that you need to be different, and that Christianity is a means to a different end, that it's like a personal transformation, then you're just in competition with all sorts of other spiritual products. I always come back to something, it's like, what can I hear, or what is at church that I can't find anywhere else. Because there's so much competing for our attention. Is it unique in that you've got a Jesus-ified version of do more, be more, self optimize, or is it some message about, You can't but God can. I grew up with a picture of Christianity that was very much a hospital, or a hospice. It was very much the place you went when you fell off the bus. And I think maybe it's something American or maybe it's something just human, but we want to make it into a boot camp for new glory.

There's a serious cognitive dissonance when at the center of your faith, and what in the liturgy and in the sacraments, is a God who gave up agency, who gave up status, who was crucified, who was executed, who was only influential by lack of His influence.

 @timgaydos

**Tim Gaydos:** If you look back on the sermons, Mark would typically give a personal example of how he is a husband and, Hey, look, here's what I do.

**Mike Cospers:** This is Tim Gaydos. He served for a number of years as the pastor of Mars Hill Downtown.

**Tim Gaydos:** And it would always end with these moral examples of what it looks like, and what it should look like in your life. And that just absolutely buried people.

**Mike Cospers:** Tim admits that he didn't have a keen awareness of this at the time when he was at Mars Hill, but in the months and years afterwards, the experience of that painful exit and the self doubt, and a kind of dark night of the soul that came with it, he had a renewed vision for God's grace, a clarity about what mattered. And in a way that's very similar to what David Zahl describes, he came to see the burden that was being

heaped on the members of Mars Hill.

**Tim Gaydos:** We're supposed to be buried because of the law, but then the gospel frees us, right? We're like, Oh my goodness. That's what Paul teaches throughout his epistles: I'm freed by the gospel. And so we should be freed. But what happened at Mars Hill was that you would come back and you'd bury people and say, If you're not this kind of husband, if you're not this kind of wife, if you're not this and that. And so you had people who were absolutely just buried and had these chains of the law around them. And the verse that stands out to me that just stood, that never stood out to me before, but it did after I left, in Galatians where Paul says, You began this life in the Spirit, why are you trying to finish it in the flesh? And to me, that summarizes Mars Hill. Maybe something that began in the Spirit - perhaps, I think it did - but now you're trying to finish it in the flesh. To me, that was a lot of the distortion of the gospel, and it was burying people and putting them in chains again.

**Mike Cospers:** It really was stunning for me over the past year and a half to see how often Driscoll's sermons ended with his personal example, especially when it came to marriage and parenting, and so many of his sermons ended talking about marriage or parenting. He curated an image of himself as the consummate provider, defender, both king of the castle and pastor of the family. And there was an unapologetic sense in which he framed marriage as transactional - the husband goes into the marketplace and brings home the bacon, the wife cares for the needs of the home, and especially the needs of her husband. We've already covered how at times those were described in specifically sexual terms, but it went beyond that too, to stuff like nachos.

**Mark Driscoll:** Men feel like their life is desert, and they want to come home to a wife, a home, children, that is a place of rest, refreshment, rejuvenation. Here she says, he's laying on the couch and eating. It's biblical, let him do it. Might I suggest nachos and wings?

**Mike Cospers:** You might say, Well, that's just a joke, don't take Mark so seriously. But then moments later, he continues the point.

50 MIN

**Mark Driscoll:** See, if your husband loves you and he's working hard all day, and he's out there slugging it out to feed the family, and the whole day has been a desert, no encouragement, no support, no replenishment. He comes home. You want to greet him at the door and be Ein Gedi: I love you, welcome home, Sweetheart.

**Mike Cospers:** And he gets back to nachos again.

**Mark Driscoll:** One guy said it to me recently. I said, how's your marriage going? He said, Great. I said, Really, what happened? He said, I came home from work the other day, my wife greeted me, and sitting next to my recliner chair was a plate of nachos and a drink. She said, Welcome home, I know you've had a rough day. He said, I love that woman. Who wouldn't?

**Mike Cospers:** This gets at one of the more complicated dynamics with Mark. When was he preaching, and when was he joking? Were women literally supposed to have wings and nachos at the ready, or was he just playing for the laughs? What I found is that

there were at least a couple of different audiences inside the church, and they drew different lines around when to take him seriously. Some heard this kind of stuff like he was playing a character, sort of an Archie Bunker in an Affliction t-shirt. But to make that judgment, you had to have enough context to see past the Bible and the pulpit, and the national platform, and the dozens of elders who lined up to follow him, and the countless others who were trying to remake themselves and their homes in his image. The more they took it literally, the more potential for damage emerged.

**Michelle:** So in 2008, came into the church at 23 years old.

**Mike Cospers:** This is Michelle, but that's not her real name - at her request we're holding that back. She came to the church with a strong religious background, and that shaped the way she received many of the messages. What attracted her and her ex-husband though, was what attracted a lot of people to the church.

**Michelle:** It was, yeah, right at the beginning, actually, I think of the Peasant Princess series. And it was interesting because, we talked a little bit the other day about the media piece, and I think that actually really drew us in, because there was a really great - It sounds silly now - but there was a really great intro video to that sermon series. But it really just was engaging.

**Mike Cospers:** This audio is from that promotional trailer, and engaging is definitely one word for it. It's wild. It's a mix of animation styles that include Disney and anime and comic book looks, all in hyper neon colors. And it features images from Song of Solomon, especially the sexualized stuff that Driscoll emphasized: towers, fruit trees, bouncing deer, young girls. You get the point. If you're an insider, it's kind of a joke, you know the way Driscoll likes to teach this stuff is kind of enigmatic and you don't necessarily take it too seriously. But if you're young and you're struggling and you're trying to make sense of marriage and sex, it's a whole different invitation with a whole different set of consequences.

**Mark Driscoll:** The Peasant Princess is our ongoing sermon series in which we are studying the Song of Songs. My name is Pastor Mark, and I'm the preaching pastor at Mars Hill Church. In this book, you'll...

**Michelle:** Coming from the background of purity culture, but being now a married person and trying to navigate sex, it was really of interest. Trying to figure that out within the relationship, but also trying to figure out roles of, what does it mean to be a godly wife? And I think we both came... My ex-husband and I both came with that earnestness really of looking to learn.

**Mike Cospers:** As we looked at in Episode Five, Driscoll's teaching on sex and marriage was essentially made in his and Grace's image, going beyond the idea that men were to be leaders in the church and home as many complementarians believe, to a hyper-masculine vision of men as combative, aggressors, and initiative takers, who took the weight of the world on their shoulders. In contrast, women were to be caregivers, homemakers, raising lots of kids and serving their husbands and churches. And while some might say that's too broad a generalization, it's the picture that almost every

woman who joined the church in her early twenties described to me.

**Michelle:** I particularly, I know I started to change who I was to try to fit into that mold. It was very unfortunate because by trying to do that, and by trying to become the people that we thought we were supposed to be, and take on the roles that we thought we were supposed to take on, we actually had the opposite effect.

**Mike Cospser:** That vision for marriage went beyond personality and included sex. And at Mars Hill, there was a lot of talk about expectations for sex and marriage.

**Michelle:** It was framed as an exchange and as something owed, and if you don't fulfill your duty, now you're in sin. It's not that I'm allowed to have choice and agency because I have a headache today or I'm tired, or I'm just not in the mood, I don't even have that opportunity to consider whether or not I wanna do it, because the answer must be yes, otherwise I'm in violation of the God of the universe. That's a powerful tool and it was... For me, it was very effective.



**Colleen Ramser:** Essentially, the essence of trauma is powerlessness.

**Mike Cospser:** This is Colleen Ramser. She's a licensed mental health therapist, specializing in trauma, specifically in the areas of domestic abuse and spiritual abuse. Much of her practice involves working with women like Michelle, helping them understand the ways they've lost a sense of themselves, a loss of agency. She also works with churches and church leaders, helping them understand the dynamics of abuse and its long-term impact.

55 MIN

**Colleen Ramser:** Anytime there's one image bearer who's using their God-designed agency and power or dominion to exert control, and these are my desires and my wants and my needs, and I'm gonna take it, and the person experiences powerlessness, then there's grounds for trauma. And then that toxicity in the body and what happens and how a person feels that they have no personhood. They can't say, This is where I'm at, this is who I am, this is what I want, or don't want.

**Mike Cospser:** In Michelle's case, that loss of a sense of self happened because she was trying to live into the vision for womanhood that was being preached from the pulpit on Sundays. For her to object to anything, required overcoming a pretty intense wall of resistance, a wall constructed of layer upon layer of teaching that placed authority outside of her own will. Mars Hill constantly emphasized hierarchy: Children submitting to parents, wives submitting to husbands, husbands to pastors. And of course, Mark was the first among equals of the pastors, and he regularly talked about hearing straight from God. And it's not as though there was universal endorsement of Mark's teaching on these things. Lots of people in leadership at the church and in Christian networks and institutions groaned inwardly at some of the stuff Mark taught about sex and submission, but they'd roll their eyes and mostly ignore it, often because their agreement about other doctrines that they saw as cultural battlegrounds, like women in leadership or inerrancy, or specific theories of the atonement, made it worth tolerating his excesses. Michelle's story is an example of the collateral damage that comes from that posture.

**Michelle:** I was quiet, I was docile sexually. I never ever said no, I never ever set a boundary. And yet inside I was torn up. I remember intentionally dissociating during sex because I did not want to be there, so I had this entire internal experience, you know, trauma experience, but I never expressed that, and so that was not clear to my husband. And I never stated any sort of hesitation to him, just because there was no framework for that.

**Mike Cospers:** The framework that did exist in the church was that hierarchy, and when she raised concerns or expressed her own unhappiness, the presumption in much of the counsel they got from friends and pastors at the church was that they just needed to press harder into what Mark taught. He needed to be a better leader, she needed to be more submissive and self-deferential.

At the heart of this, though, isn't just an attitude that privileged men when it came to sexual wants and needs, though that was certainly the case. There was a deeper issue, I believe, and it had implications beyond marriage too. Here's Driscoll in a sermon titled, *Covenant and Headship*.

**Mark Driscoll:** What I'm gonna ask you to do today is to assume that you've been lied to and at least give me the benefit of the doubt. Multiple lies have been told you. One of the greatest lies is that the foundation of all relationships with us and one another, and with us and God, is love. The foundation of all relationships is not love. That's a lie. That's a lie. The foundation of all relationships is covenant, and love comes out of a covenant.

**Mike Cospers:** You could spend a long time breaking down what Driscoll is saying here, and there are probably a stack of PhD theses a mile high on the relationship between God's love and His covenants. But it's also not difficult or time-consuming at all to see that what Mark is saying here isn't supported by any tradition in church history. In fact, it's a classic case of putting the cart before the horse.

I asked Dr. Gregg Allison, author of *Historical Theology*, to give his thoughts on it, and as he put it to me, Love is an attribute of God, it's part of his divine nature, and it's different from and foundational to any covenant He's established with his people. Covenant, then, is derivative of love, not the other way around. To put it another way, when we talk about love, we're talking about who God is. When we talk about covenants, we talk about certain relationships. But the idea that love is constrained by covenants is just not found anywhere in scripture or in any church tradition.

It might be tempting to dismiss this as an odd detail in an old sermon. But again, what was so definitional for Mars Hill and its members was this emphasis on gender and authority, and this sermon is on headship, the idea that men are to be heads and leaders of their families. Driscoll here is moving the foundation of the relationship between husbands and wives away from love and into covenant, and he goes on to emphasize the role of authority in covenants as well.

**Mark Driscoll:** In scripture, there are different kinds of covenants, and each covenant has a head. The person that is over that covenant and sort of everyone under them is implicated in their decisions.

**Mike Cospers:** To give him the most generous hearing, you could consider how he is responding to his context: Casual divorces, lazy and disconnected dads, or as a complementarian, the importance of gender roles. But once again, you'd be hard pressed to find anyone, even in his own tradition, who would say that covenant is a more important concept than love in understanding why Christians believe what they believe about these things. By doing this, though, it places an accent on the role of authority in human relationships, especially between men and women in marriage. And the question to ask is, What happens in the culture of a community where explicitly or implicitly love is deemphasized to highlight authority? What does it look like where that vision of authority vested solely in men is married to the vision of sexuality that we've talked about earlier in this podcast, particularly where it's taught that women are responsible for satisfying men so that they're not tempted, and so that marriages are secure and satisfied?

How does that shape the experience of someone like Michelle who arrives without much context for Christian sexuality? And what are the other implications for women in the church, for how they relate to pastors, and for how the church responds to a marriage in crisis or a woman in crisis, in particular?

**Lindsay:** Leadership was mostly male and they were very reluctant to talk to you, especially one on one.

**Mike Cospers:** This is Lindsay, and that's also not her real name.

**Lindsay:** So if you were in a situation where maybe your relationship wasn't healthy, like I was, that was really difficult.

**Mike Cospers:** Lindsay came to the church at the end of 2010, when she married her husband who was already there, and there were a lot of aspects of Mars Hill's culture around gender and sexuality that came as a shock, in spite of her own conservative, evangelical background.

**Lindsay:** I felt since I was a trauma survivor and a sexual assault survivor in particular, it did kind of mark me at Mars Hill as being like a project. So in community groups, or when you got to know somebody, you were supposed to kind of expose all of that right away, and I think it became a form of trauma bonding at times, because you were either confessing a sexual sin or you were confessing - the way Mark would phrase it was - sins you've done or sins done against you. And I would have people fully confess to me, like the first time I was hanging out with them, all their sexual sins and say, Well, you're in my community and this is what I'm supposed to do. And I was kind of like, I thought we were getting coffee.

**Mike Cospers:** This part of Lindsay's story is important to take note of for a few reasons. As I've said already, it fits a pattern others have described of these high pressure environments, which often have the reverse effect of what's intended, making people in the room with traumatic histories feel less safe. Second, I think it's illustrative of a broader phenomenon in the church, one that I don't think is unique. It's a posture that assumes that the church can and should handle anything. That might be coming from a very

sincere place and a real desire to help. It might also be coming from hubris or desire for power. But in any case, when you begin to handle people's deepest wounds, you're playing with fire. Lindsay felt right away that it wasn't a safe place for someone with her history, and that feeling only intensified when things turned out tragic in her marriage.

**Lindsay:** The first time he was physically abusive to me was he ended up throwing me in a way where I wasn't sure I was gonna be able to get back up. And so it was pretty extreme. And he went immediately to the elders before anything else, and they called me, they asked if I would be willing to come to the church and have a conversation. And kind of the way that a lot of Mars Hill structure was, is that as long as you were confessing, you were repentant, you were open about what had happened, and able to take the difficult questions and the kind of grilling that the Mars Hill leadership would give you - especially the man, the husband - then you were considered to be repentant. And my husband was very willing to do that. He went there first, he confessed, we sat down, had this counseling session, and then my role was to accept his repentance and move forward from there. The problem is, I don't think Mars Hill leadership had really been trained to look at these types of patterns, and that kind of pattern in domestic violence is pretty common. You would have big, emotional reaction, you would confess, you'd say you're never gonna do it again, and then there's a cycle.

**Mike Cosper:** I spoke with a number of pastors at Mars Hill about Lindsay's story, and there was a general consensus that this sort of thing did happen. That being, pastors choosing to handle a domestic violence or other crisis care in house, and making the many mistakes reflected in Lindsay's story. There was among some of the elders, a hubris, and at times a feeling of responsibility that they needed to be competent for anything. Over time, elders like Mike Wilkerson and Phil Smidt implemented crisis care protocol, that in a case like this would've automatically triggered them to call the police and arrange for separation of the abused from the abuser. Is the degree to which a church with this rigid emphasis on lines of authority, as well as the rigidly defined gender roles, provides adequate safety valves and safeguards for someone suffering abuse like Lindsay, or suffering a loss of health and agency like Michelle, to show up, be heard, believed, and get help?

65 MIN

For Lindsay, the answer was no, even when circumstances took her to another campus with different pastors.

**Lindsay:** There was one time where I was sat down. I was set on leaving, I just didn't feel safe. And the elder who was doing this meeting said, We're gonna sit here until we hear from God what you should do. So we sat in silence for a few minutes and I didn't hear anything. I've never heard anything audibly from God, if I hear anything, it's gonna be probably a scripture, that's just how I am. He said, Well, I heard something from the Holy Spirit, He spoke to me, did he speak to you? And I was like, Nope. And so he was like, Okay, we're gonna sit here until you do. And it was very clearly communicated to me that what I needed to hear from the Holy Spirit was that, Yes, I would come back to my husband.

**Mike Cosper:** In 2013, she left Mars Hill and began attending another church in town. In 2014, her husband joined her there, but it would be another six years before she was

able to leave the marriage. She told me that looking back, she holds no anger at the pastors who tried to care for her at the time; she sees their responses as an attempt to do their best without proper wisdom or training. It's the broader structure that troubles her. It was an environment where she always had her husband between her and anyone that could help her.

**Lindsay:** He was being berated and called to leadership all the time. And so if you were to add to that, or if you were to try to go around him in any way, that would be costly in that type of relationship. And then, the higher up you go, following that hierarchy is more inaccessible, certain pastors were. And it added to that hype, I think, in that anyone who was close to Mark was really... It was kind of prestigious. So yeah, it definitely played a part in how I felt like I didn't have a voice in the church.

**Mike Cosper:** It was difficult for Lindsay and Michelle both to even imagine something different, because life at Mars Hill was immersive.

**Michelle:** It wasn't just, Oh, we all go to church together and men do this and women do that. It was down to the bone, because we were going to church together, we were serving together, we were in community group together, we were in women's group together. Our lives became intertwined and these expectations pervaded all of it. I don't even know that I would call it pressure. It was just the norm that was set through the pulpit and reinforced through these many, many channels. And I was on the hook because of that earnestness and wanting to honor God.

**Mike Cosper:** Michelle began a kind of deconstruction process of her own under surprising circumstances. After having had two grueling childbirth experiences, she decided she wanted to become a doula, and as part of her training took a massage therapy class.

**Michelle:** It ended up being the most profound transformative experience of my life because there was an expectation of consent of agency, and so if I had someone's hands on me because they were performing a massage, I could ask them to stop and they would stop immediately. If I asked them for deeper pressure or lighter pressure, they accommodated me. And I had never in my life experienced touch in such a respectful and consent-based way. And so with that, I began to question, I began to realize, Wow, what I had experienced before, I did not consent to that. Even though I didn't say no, there wasn't a full sense of agency and that consent, and then any boundaries that were expressed, being honored. I began to integrate those experiences and started asking questions and started being vocal. And I started having discussions with my husband, to say, Hey, this is what I'm experiencing, this doesn't seem right to me, can we talk about it? And at that time, it actually wasn't at all geared around sexuality, it was geared around mental health. Because my experiences with postpartum depression were severe and ongoing, and that was not welcome in the relationship, and it wasn't really welcome in that church context either.

When I began the process of speaking out and starting to separate and leave that relationship, I did not have the support of the people of the church we went to, and I didn't have the support of our friends that I still had from Mars Hill. So I had one friend who was with me from beginning to end to my marriage, who saw me through



everything, and I had her support. She was a Mars Hill person. But otherwise, standing up for myself and standing up for the respect that I knew I deserved, it was at the cost of those relationships.

**Mike Cospers:** Lindsay's story has a similar outcome. She made the decision to end her marriage in 2019, and did so when she had the resources in 2020. It's also come with the loss of relationships. When she and I first spoke, she said something almost as an aside, that I think was a key insight.

**Lindsay:** There was this underlying current that was hard to pinpoint at first. Even if he was preaching on passages that were kind of like about Jesus being a Shepherd, which is a very gentle thing, there was this angst to it. So the way I saw that kind of translate to my husband was he definitely started to become more and more like Mark Driscoll, and I noticed that in a lot of staff too. Like even if their inclination maybe was to be more gentle, they would be called to lead their households, called to lead the church, to show this more aggressive side, and that was considered to be a leader. A lot of really good people who became involved with Mars Hill because they really wanted to serve God, and what was hard was seeing them become angrier and harsher towards friends and family. And for me, like Mark was only one person, but it was everyone that kind of enforced what he was saying that was the most damaging from my perspective. Cuz the things that happened within the church, from campus pastors and then the whole hierarchy down, is definitely a replication of that model, and it was intended to be that way. Mark wanted to train young men and harness that energy and he did, but he also harnessed a lot of that anger and that kind of aggression that he was encouraging.

**Mike Cospers:** Experiences and observations like this should invite us to circle back and ask again, What was the good news here? What role did anger play in shaping that message or contorting it? How did it shape the way people at the church saw Jesus? And on that last question, we don't have to wonder about which Jesus Driscoll got excited to preach about.

**Mark Driscoll:** He gets a snapshot. The curtain is pulled back and behold, a white horse. I love this. How many of you grew up watching Westerns? The good guy always rides the white horse, it's biblical. The one sitting on it is called faithful and true, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. Jesus will never take a beating again. That was a one-shot deal for salvation, that is not an ongoing job for Jesus, to take a beating. His eyes are like a flame of fire. I just love this. This is ultimate fighter Christ. A hip hop buddy of mine calls it thug Jesus.

**Mike Cospers:** This was a picture of Jesus that he often talked about in sermons, lectures, books, and interviews. He made fun of the way others worshiped what he called a Richard Simmons, hippie queer Christ, and he said he'd never worship someone he thought he could beat up. But I have to admit that when I hear this, I think of a scene in the movie Talladega Nights where Ricky Bobby sits at the dinner table with his teammate and his family, talking about why he likes praying to baby Jesus. It starts an argument, his wife and father-in-law think it's weird and want him to pray to adult Jesus. His teammate chimes in and says he likes to pray to a Jesus in a tuxedo t-shirt because he likes a Jesus that likes to party, and his son likes a ninja Jesus who fights off samurai.

One would hope that the absurdity of Ricky Bobby would help to scare any sensible person off of identifying with such a weirdly specific Jesus, but beyond his own identification I think it reveals a lot about what Mark thought was necessary for achieving his goal of reaching and inspiring young men. As we've covered before, he believed reaching them would open the door to reaching anyone else.

It's interesting to me that in the same sermon where Driscoll gets so excited about this version of Jesus, he has an aside where he says that the church shouldn't look like this, that we're supposed to look like Jesus' earthly ministry and not Revelation 19. And yet inside Mars Hill, war was the defining theme of its mission, media and preaching was the air war, community groups and counseling and care was the ground war. They didn't take retreats, they went on advances. They didn't train church planters at conferences, they held boot camps. Privately, Driscoll used the same language. You were to sleep with your boots on. Part of your job description was often referred to as your range of fire. Lots of organizations adopt military language, but something more was happening here. Those images and metaphors got married to another theme in Mars Hill's life: The state of emergency brought on by the need for evangelism outside the church and the rapid growth that was happening inside the church. And so it took on a heightened intensity. They weren't metaphors anymore. The war was truly life and death, or more than that, it was eternal life and death. And the closer you got to the center of the organization, the more real that felt.

 @jnathanburke

**Nate Burke:** It added an intensity to relationships that I can't deny was powerful.

**Mike Cospers:** This is Nate Burke, Mark's Executive Assistant, who also was kind of a Chief of Staff.

75 MIN

**Nate Burke:** I think I told you this recently, but listening to the podcast has made some other things feel very dull lately. It reminded me of that feeling of being on all the time. If I need a dose of something, I call Jesse up, I'll be like, yo, man, what the [CENSORED]. But there's so many people that just get burned in that paradigm. And like I said, I think, in the previous interview, I think Sun Tzu in the Art of War actually says, No country benefits from protracted warfare.

**Mike Cospers:** Here's Jesse Bryan.

**Jesse Bryan:** We do community group and everybody...We called it, like, the sin hunting thing. You would go and you'd be like, Oh, [CENSORED], it's Tuesday night. And you would sit there for two hours and get grilled on everything. That was what it was like, you know what I'm saying? Now, I think a lot of that was under the guise of, like, Young men need that.

**Mike Cospers:** A lot of Driscoll's national platform and recognition came specifically because of his ability to connect with young men. On the local level, you find older men and women who joined the church because they'd watched their son's faith take root there for the first time. On a national level, he seemed to have his finger on the pulse of something that pastors in a variety of other churches and movements wanted to tap into.

But there's an irony at the core of this success. He'd often talk about how he wanted to call these men to mission and purpose, and in a way that was sort of the virtuous mirror image to that of cults, mobs, and terrorist groups. And while there are lots of men whose lives and families were shaped for the better by the call to responsibility and leadership they heard at Mars Hill, the truth is, the closer you got to the core of leadership at the church, the more mob-like and cult-like it felt. What ties these together though, isn't just that they're driven by a sense of purpose. It's that they're driven by a sense of loyalty to a charismatic individual. This is something Chuck DeGroat has written about extensively, including in his book *When Narcissism Comes to Church*.

**Chuck DeGroat:** What we're seeing, I think, today in our world as people gather around particular people, particular movements, and attach themselves to it for a sense of power, I feel small, I feel insignificant, I feel like I'm lacking. I don't feel like people are taking my story seriously, I feel like I'm the forgotten man. But when I attach myself to the movement, to the figure, now I feel strong, I feel large, I feel important.

**Mike Cosper:** I found it interesting to talk to different people about this theme, and by and large, it fit. Young men who found their way into Mars Hill, especially in those early years, often came without a clear picture of who they were going to be. Even someone like Jesse Bryan, who'd had a lot of career success for a guy in his early twenties, found something in the vision of the church and in Mark that he felt like he was missing.

**Jesse Bryan:** I remember when I directed my first feature - I remember having to do it by 26, because I think Kubrick was 26 when he directed his first film, it was something like that - and going okay, I did that and I felt worse, because now I knew for a fact that if I do that thing I thought I wanted to do that I wouldn't feel any better. Like, I think Rick Rubin said something like, It's hard to get really depressed until your dreams come true. So the Mars thing was the idea that you could still feel connected to something meaningful that's bigger than yourself, and you can still... You don't have to become the thing that you thought you would hate if you became it, which is pretty much Ned Flanders or something like that. There's also something really appealing because when you're a young man especially, very few people actually challenge you because usually they don't know what to do with you. And so they either they avoid you or they try to be really nice to you because they're hoping that... I don't know. And then you have somebody who challenges you and is like, Hey, stop being stupid, put your pants on, get your [CENSORED] together, stop being so selfish. And then you start doing those things and you start going, I feel better about myself.

**Chuck DeGroat:** That's what we see in context where cult leaders, terrorist leaders recruit young men for a particular kind of cause. I'm not trying to paint him as a terrorist leader, but there's a certain psychology there where it makes a whole lot of sense. And when you find guys like that, really young, eager guys, man, they will follow. They will do things for you, they'll go to the ends of the earth for you. And it does feel like a crusader mentality. Like we're at war. You're really preying on the insecurities of young men who are longing to be plugged into something, who are longing for a larger story; I'll give you the larger story. I am the larger story, and we're gonna change the world together.

**Mike Cosper:** We have to ask them what the formative effect of living under this kind

of pressure was. What happens to the soul when it's living under 24/7 wartime conditions? Lindsay observed it as an undercurrent of anger. So what are the other places that it manifest?



**Donovan Medina:** Levi called me one morning and he was like, Hey, my dad is trying to fly out of Albuquerque, he's trying to get to California, he's at the airport, he's messed up, he's smashing things at the airport. Can you help me?

80 MIN

**Mike Cospers:** This is Donovan Medina, who was one of the pastors at Mars Hill Albuquerque. The Levi he's referring to is Levi MacAllister, a member at the church who's also a recording artist that performs under the name, Levi the Poet. You'll hear from him in a moment. After getting that call, Donovan grabbed another pastor from the church and drove to the airport to meet Levi and pick up his dad. Levi's dad's name was Mark MacAllister.

**Donovan Medina:** All I wanted to do was just get him out of there safely. So we're in the truck and we had Mark with us, Mark MacAllister, and Mark just started talking and I'll never forget these words. He said... He basically said, Mark Driscoll is a harsh man, he doesn't understand mercy, and he doesn't understand mercy because he hasn't suffered. And those words, they just stuck with me. To this day, I still think about those words. That was the world that we lived in.

**Mike Cospers:** Here's Levi MacAllister.

@levithepoet

**Levi McAllister** I've just bought in, hook, line and sinker, on everything. And so around that time, my dad started using that language and saying, Son, like, Mars is making you into a harsh man, you need to have some discernment here. But I couldn't see it, and I think I steamrolled him.

**Mike Cospers:** Mark McAllister had suffered from mental illness for a long time, and Levi's time at Mars Hill had shaped a posture of aggression in him that made him inclined to take his dad's struggles head-on.

**Levi McAllister** Some of our interventions with him, they ended up sounding more like sin hunting, like in a Redemption Group type of setting. In hindsight, I really view that as that lack of grace.

**Mike Cospers:** So back on that day Donovan is describing, they picked Mark MacAllister up at the airport and headed to the church, determined once again to take the initiative and try to do something to help.

**Levi McAllister** It turned into a three-hour long demon trial, where at the end, he was just shaking and asking if he could take a break so that he could take his meds. And I don't know what to do with that. I know that it was well-intended, but it's really difficult to think about now. My sister's like, God, dad just needed a hug. It would've been better if we could have thought about all of this as some, like, very badly gone counseling session, and yet it's called a demon trial and there are all of these things that go on with it. And so I know that it was folks doing their best, our best, myself included. I'm not trying

to hang anyone out to dry, but it's hard to look back on that. And you asked about what was the harsh culture versus the loving culture, and it's stuff like that. It's like, my dad is telling me that I'm a harsh man and I'm telling him he just doesn't understand. Meanwhile, he's sitting there, a night removed from trying to commit suicide, and I'm trying to figure out what sort of sin issue might be at the cause of something like this.

**Mike Cosper:** Mark MacAllister attempted suicide again, successfully, a few months later. When I hear this story, just as when I hear Lindsay's story, or Michelle's, the phrase that keeps coming to mind is playing with fire. It's an incredibly powerful thing to stand in a pulpit and act with the authority a pastor has in his church. It's also a powerful thing to have the authority of a pastor in shaping someone's response to abuse or to a mental health crisis. You're playing with fire. People in your church have entrusted you with the direction of their lives and to care for their souls. To take that lightly, to act with hubris, to feel any kind of swell of pride in thinking that you can handle something simply by virtue of your position in a church is dangerous, and it can and does have devastating consequences.

Something that became clear to me though, the more I talked to people, the more stories I heard, the closer I got to people who were in that inner circle, was the disturbing reality that the anger and the aggression and the hubris wasn't seen as a crack in the system or a problem to solve, it was actually seen as a virtue.

**Nate Burke:** Right after my third was born and was a newborn in our bed, and I lived in this house, we had our windows open, it was the summer. And every once in a while, cars would drag race down the street. And I woke up hearing this happen and I was like, Son of a [CENSORED] and then I kind of went back to sleep. And then it happened again, they turned around and did another run, and I got up and I'm like, no shirt on. I grabbed this big canister of bear mace. And I go outside, and this car comes like it's doing another pass and it starts flying down the street with its halogens on. And I had visualized getting into fights all the time during that era. That can't be healthy. Like, I'm not a psychologist, but I could say that's not good. And I thought, here's my opportunity. And I took the pepper spray canister, and I just threw it as hard as I could, and it hit the side of this car, miraculously - I don't know how I did it, it was flying. And just boom, put this big dent in it. And it slows down and the canister rolls to my feet, and I suddenly was like, What the hell did I just do. Go back in the house, and I'm sitting in the window going, Oh my gosh, now they're looking for me, they know where I live, maybe they have guns. I've got a family in here and a newborn, what a completely foolish reckless thing to do. I couldn't sleep all night. Eventually they took off. I called the cops, told them what happened. They said, do you want a police officer to come by, when they show up, I said, yeah, and I'm just gonna tell 'em the whole straight story. Cops never show up.

Next day, I call Mark. I'm like, I did some very undeacon-like behavior last night. I told him the story and he's like, Oh, [CENSORED] it, those guys are [CENSORED], they're not coming back. And I remember thinking, I know that's wrong. Like, how did I get a pass for that? I almost think that helped the image of who it was that he didn't mind that I was.

**Mike Cosper:** Lots of people both inside and outside Mars Hill embraced Mark because they were inspired by the connections he made to young men. He was answering their

felt need, and calling them to a purpose that was bigger than themselves. But if that tempts you at all to be dismissive of what happened in the aftermath, I encourage you to ask the men closest to him during these years, the ones who'd walked a decade with him or more. Ask them what they make now of his model of masculinity.

**Nate Burke:** When push came to shove, he'd buckle. It's just like that Monty Python thing of, When danger reared its ugly head, he bravely turned his back and fled, Sir Robin ran away. Like at the end of the day, all that fight talk, it's nonsense. It's nonsense.

**Mike Cospers:** We'll be right back.

For Jesse Bryan in particular, the fact that he was deceived, and that he contributed so significantly to deceiving others, has created kind of an obsession for him.

**Jesse Bryan:** It's like when you watch these shows about either just straight up cults, or cults personality, or whatever you wanna call it, where you go, Oh my gosh, just watch the hoops that they jump through to justify stuff. And I watch them and I go, Oh man, I've been there. I don't judge any of those people. Like, I think the worst thing that could happen with a show like this is that people look at it and go, I'd never fall for that. It's growth mindset or close mindset, pretty much. If you actually looked at this story and went and just try this on for size, this idea: You would do the exact same thing and you are capable of everything you hear these other people say. If you take that mindset into it, you will protect yourself and the ones you love. If you listen to this and it's like a freak show and you go, Well, that would never happen to me, I'd never do that, you will learn nothing and you will end up doing the same exact stuff.

But just so you know, if you're the ones doing that, you are the exact right person for someone like me to target.

**Mike Cospers:** Belief Agency talks constantly in their own marketing about truth telling. He talks all the time about the distinction between putting medicine and putting poison into the world, and all of that is birthed in his own sense of complicity and what happened at Mars Hill. And when he looks at the aftermath, one of the deep sources of anger for him is the lack of acknowledgement by many who benefited from Driscoll, of the pain they inflicted on the people they loved.

**Jesse Bryan:** It's like it's easy for them to distance themselves right now. But none of... I would just love to hear one of 'em say, You know what, this was totally jacked up, we should have never done it, and we ruined a lot of people's lives, and I took the money. Because that's what everybody did. We all did that. And we felt good about it because at the end of the day we had numbers we could look at and feel good about it.

Now when you see the amount of lives we destroyed, it's staggering, it's absolutely staggering. Our city is cratered. You know how many friends I pulled into this garbage? It's nuts.

**Mike Cospers:** And that actually brings me to the other temptation that I think we need to resist when it comes to the Mars Hill story: The urge to either look away or to look

for a bow to put on the ending. We want the satisfaction of being able to say, Look at what happened later, look at all God did, look at how things turned out for the best for so many people. And there are definitely threads of this story where that is the case. But again, the closer you got to the center of Mars Hill, the more invested you were, the more a true believer you were, the more pain you saw and experienced for yourself.

Here's Mike Anderson again.

**Mike Anderson:** I will bet you... I'll bet you that there is a bigger staff of people in Seattle who just deal with the counseling of the PTSD and the panic attacks and the depression and suicidal thoughts. I'll bet you there's a larger staff than ever worked at Mars Hill today.

**Jesse Bryan:** 100%.

**Mike Anderson:** Helping to deal with the damage. I still deal with this. The other night after listening to the fourth podcast, I was on vacation and I broke down crying in the middle of a restaurant.

**Jesse Bryan:** I had a panic attack after I heard the third podcast. That night I woke up in the middle of the night having a panic attack.

**Mike Anderson:** This stuff doesn't go away. Like, it changes the underlying operating system of who I see myself as being, what my relationship is with every other person, and what the point of life is. And it's like, good luck finding meaning in the rest of life if you get told this huge story that's not actually true. And I also think then you have to deal with the consequence too of, Okay, in some ways I'm an abuse victim, but I was also the abuser. And so then you have to deal with, Oh, okay, I hurt a lot of people and I didn't do it intentionally. I thought I was actually helping a lot of people. So then it makes you question just about everything you do every day after.

**Mike Cosper:** I spoke with Jesse a couple of weeks after that conversation with he and Mike, and it turned out that he'd spent the previous weekend in the hospital related to this.

**Jesse Bryan:** Dude, I'm 40 years old. I left nine years ago. I was in a hospital on Friday. I was working through putting a paragraph, like a sentence description, behind each one of the pastors, and I started feeling like my arms started getting tingly, and I couldn't catch my breath, and I started getting lightheaded, and I had to tell my colleague, I was like, hold on, Dude, I gotta lie down, I don't know what's going on, I feel like I'm gonna pass out. And I started lying down. I just started feeling almost like doom type stuff. My problem was last Saturday, I was also in the hospital, but it was for kidney stones, which I'd never had before. And so I was going, Oh, is this a result of kidney stones, and I didn't really know, and that was awful. And then it happened again. I stood up and it happened again. And then when I was in the hospital, cuz I went in to make sure, is there something wrong with my kidneys, I'm feeling lightheaded, My arms tingling, an't catch my breath. And they did a chest x-ray, they did all my panels, and they're like, You're fine.

And then I got a text from Nate and I watched my blood pressure go from, like, normal to, like, stroke territory, because it has something to do with Mars Hill. And you go, that was nine years ago. So if you say... If somebody says, Oh, it's too bad, we went to a dysfunctional church, I would say, Really, is that what this looks like? Does this look like a fender bender to anybody else? It doesn't look like one to me.

**Mike Cospser:** Here's Chuck DeGroat again.

**Chuck DeGroat:** We used to talk about trauma as happening in extreme circumstances, and now we know that there's really very real chronic trauma that comes from serving within systems like this, that get lodged in people's bodies. So much so that, you served on a staff like this and you didn't really think it had an impact on you, but two years later, you find yourself in my office talking about a little bit of depression and a little bit of anxiety and a little too much alcohol, and by the way, I have these constant headaches and I never get more than four hours of sleep at night. And I'll say, That's trauma. And they'll say, Well, what would I have to be traumatized about? And then we'll get back into their story and we'll start to connect the dots and they'll say, Oh, so that was the toll of the day in, day out, work alongside a narcissistic leader, I didn't know how much I was storing up in my body, I didn't know how much I was repressing. We go into survival mode, but our bodies can only take it for so long.

**Mike Cospser:** Many people talk to me about their own processes of healing and recovery, which were often preceded by long seasons of anxiety, depression, and struggling relationships. The fact is that they were immersed in a world like this for a long time and healing up takes a long time too.

Here's Colleen Ramser again.

95 MIN

**Colleen Ramser:** Recovery, really I think a lot of it looks like, in the beginning not pressuring them to have a relationship with God. I'm helping facilitate that later. They have to have a relationship with their own body first, in a lot of ways, is the way it feels. But then also to come to terms and to face the reality of what they lived, and grieving that. And for some of them, having that view of God based on these traumas within the church or from pastors or very, "godly" husbands, their view of God is like, Heck no, I don't want anything to do with God. And toward the later stages, after they have gone through a lot of clearing that debris in their body and living in their body more, there's an opportunity for that seed to grow again. And it's very subtle, and you have to be very careful and tread very lightly and not expect someone to be able to read a chapter a day in the Bible.

Maybe it just looks like saying, God, I am just gonna try to wrap my head around you being near me right now, based on what I've lived. But I do see people come back to their faith and that's the best part of what I do. I love being able to almost garden that back, using whatever God's given me and the space and the patience, the self control to not impose, but to just be patient and allow that to unfold, and for the Spirit to work, and for me to enter in as the Spirit leads. I think it's possible for people to come... I really believe it's possible.

And then there are people who don't, and that's the hardest part of my job, is seeing



people's faith get wrecked so much by the church and pastors and these, "godly" husbands, and they're not coming back.

**Mike Cospers:** Here's Levi MacAllister.

**Levi McAllister** I'll be honest with you. I'm having a harder and harder time calling Mars Hill anything but a cult. One of the hardest parts about that familial nature, which I know more than I have talked about with you, is the way that Mark self-identified as our dad, the church as his daughters, the men, his sons. And as someone who lost my dad, I was the sort of target Mars Hill demographic, fatherless men who needed direction, and I needed direction. When that, Who the Hell Do You Think You Are sermon was the first one presented to Mars Hill Albuquerque, I was excited. I took the beating as though it was conviction. And it's hard now to look at that and then think, Man, you don't get to self-identify as someone's dad. That's not...A father isn't an identity that you can ascribe to yourself. If young and fatherless men want to bestow that honor upon you, fantastic, but that's not what happened. And then you left just like their dads did, just like my dad did. And there are moments in the therapy that I've done since where I sometimes feel - and feel ashamed for feeling - as though, God, sometimes I wonder if this all was more traumatic than the loss that I went through with my actual dad. Sometimes it can feel like that because similar to my real father's own story, who came from a very broken home and found family in the church when he was hurt by it, it was so much more difficult cuz it was like, Well, these are the people of God, I thought that I was the orphan invited into the family, and now the family is being dismantled by the dad again.

**Mike Cospers:** When I hear people urge us to talk about all the good that came out of Mars Hill, asking why we can't just focus on the redemptive aspects of this story, I want to invite them to sit with Levi or Mike Anderson or Lindsay or Michelle, and ask them the same question. I wanna remind them that Jesus leaves the ninety nine for the one, which means that these stories of loss and disorientation and shattered faith matter just as much as the encouraging stories we can tell about the churches planted in the aftermath.

And sometimes, to be honest, if I'm in a particularly dark mood, I'll tell them that they sound like Job's friends, and encourage them to talk less, join those who are sitting in the ashes, and just weep. Similarly, I've heard lots of people make comparisons between Driscoll and people like Martin Luther. Historic and controversial figures who, as the logic goes, had to break some eggs to make some omelets.

So yes, let's stick with Luther and I'll agree: Luther was bombastic, he was a fighter. There are certainly things about Luther that are worthy of critique. But at the end of the day, do we think that Luther and Driscoll were fighting for the same cause? Luther's sense of being embattled wasn't imaginary. He was never far from a gallows and a mob who would have loved to string him up on it. And he wasn't fighting to preserve his empire and his power, but to unchain the gospel and the word of God so that it could be freely shared in the church. And if we want to take Luther a step further, look at the first of his 95 Theses, where he wrote, Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when he said, Do sincerely repent, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance. If that value that all of life was repentance had been embodied at Mars Hill, there would be so much less pain today than there is now.

100 MIN

 @jenzug

Let's go one step further with Luther, and let's talk about his theology of the cross, where he argued that God always accomplishes His purposes in ways that subvert expectations and that look like failure and foolishness. The Savior of the world didn't come on a thundercloud, surrounded with an army. He came as a helpless baby. He didn't ride into Jerusalem on a horse, like a conquering hero. He came on a donkey, a parody of those more familiar expressions of power.

The cross itself appears to the world as the apparent victory of evil over good, and yet it was God's way of doing the exact opposite. So yes, let's talk about Luther. He was loud and bombastic, but he risked his life to loosen the chains of grace, to broaden access to the gospel message, and to rebuke a world that thought that accumulating power was a means by which God would ever accomplish His ends.

**Jen Zug:** I love Mars Hill. I began attending in my late twenties, way back in the 90s. I served alongside Mark Driscoll for many years as a volunteer and eventually became his assistant.

**Mike Cospser:** This is Jen Zug reading from a blog post that she wrote in August, 2014.

**Jen Zug:** It was an exciting time for all of us. We put the first MP3's on the Mars Hill website, we wrote our own music and arrangements, because we believe that we were sub-creators of God, our ultimate Creator. Mark Driscoll mentored me alongside other young men and women who served at the time, and my life is better because of how he connected a theoretical gospel to my real, practical, everyday life.

**Mike Cospser:** The post sums up what a lot of Mars Hill church members felt, that the sorrow over the church's collapse wasn't just about the exposed lack of character, but also its betrayal over the years of the values that they'd been taught.

**Jen Zug:** The church that once sent me on a mission to the culture slowly became a hindrance to that mission, as Brian and I fielded questions from non-believing friends about why this Jesus Mark talked about sounds more like Glenn Beck, and less like the Jesus we keep talking about.

**Mike Cospser:** This is one of those breakup letters where the message is definitely, it's not me, it's you. But it's also not without heartbreak.

**Jen Zug:** I grieve Mars Hill's departure from my life over a year ago, because I loved my church and I thought we'd be on mission together until I was old and gray. I thought my participation in building the mission of Mars Hill would be a legacy left for my children and grandchildren. Maybe I was foolish to put so much faith in a human institution led by sinful men. The true legacy I leave for my children is a love for Jesus and His word, and a pursuit of a true gospel community. I will always love you, Mars Hill, like a school girl remembers her first crush, but I choose to continue forward on the mission God gave me through your influence, even if you choose another direction.

**Mike Cospser:** Jen and her husband, Bryan, made the decision to leave the church when Tim Gaydos resigned from Mars Hill Downtown in the spring of 2013.

**Bryan Zug:** The night that Gaydos resigned, I think it was like there was a service and we got together at somebody's nearby apartment, and there were like 10 or 12 families that were all leaving at the same time. Or maybe it was five or seven, I can't remember, but it was enough. And we're like, Okay, what are we gonna do now. This is a couple of weeks before Easter, and we are like, Okay, we have no church for Easter. Our kids were going to be part of the Easter pageant and they weren't anymore. And we're like, Okay. Our only plan at the time was like, Let's get potlucks, let's not totally abandon each other, and let's process through what the hell just happened.

**Mike Cospers:** Some of those gatherings in 2013 folded into the core group for a Seattle church, and the Zug's attended there for a while. But with kids in middle school, they realized that church planting wasn't the right fit for them. So they attended another church in Seattle for a time that served their kids' needs. But they definitely had a sense of displacement for themselves.

**Bryan Zug:** For 2013, probably through 2017, we did not feel like we had the energy to explain our story to anybody because it was just too traumatic. And just showing up and saying, Oh, where are you from, have you ever been involved in a church? Yeah, we have, we've been involved in some churches, yeah, yeah. And having to tell that story all the time, and then feeling at the top of, Okay, can I trust this person.

**Mike Cospers:** In 2017, they were invited by some friends to visit Qwest Church, a community that was planted in 2001 by Eugene Cho and ran in a very different track culturally and theologically from Mars Hill. Visiting there would be a strange homecoming, because in 2015, Mars Hill's original Ballard building became the home of Qwest. They attended for the first time in July of 2017. The church was highlighting a ministry they supported that provided therapists to pastors and missionaries overseas.

In her notes from that Sunday, Jen wrote this quote, Christians are messy people and sometimes Christians in full-time ministry are even messier than usual. That posture in that ministry struck her as unimaginable at Mars Hill.

**Jen Zug:** There were several points throughout our early days at Qwest where particularly Pastor Cho would make comments about... He would say things like, I understand the history of what has happened in this building.

105 MIN

**Bryan Zug:** If you were around and you had been through the hurt, you knew he was talking to you, but he wasn't doing in a flashy way. But it was the same thing in the music. Matt, the worship leader, he would play some songs from Mars Hill's bands. And like most of the congregation doesn't know where those songs come from, but Matt knows, and those of us who were there, we know. I went up to Matt afterwards and I was like, I know that song, I know the band where it came from, this is my story, I just want to say thank you.

**Mike Cospers:** In many ways, Qwest couldn't be more different than Mars Hill. It's a multiethnic church with egalitarian leadership, and much more progressive theology. And the Zug's are far from alone in being former Mars Hill leaders who made a journey into more progressive churches. For some, that comes with a measure of reactivity against

the hard line Calvinism and dogmatism of Mars Hill. That church's collapse showed that behind those hard doctrinal edges was corrupt character. But it's a mistake to chalk all of these migrations to reactivity alone. For Jen and Bryan, the Mars Hill story is about a church that started off intent on embodying the presence of Christ in ways that were new and authentic and resonant with who they were. And then the church and its leaders lost its way. They found a new iteration of that at Qwest, in the old Ballard building of all places, and the irony isn't lost on them.

**Jen Zug:** There's been a return to, in a sense, the beauty meaning truth in community, in this congregation and in this building, that feels very full circle. And...back to where we began.

**Mike Cosper:** It strikes me as especially poignant that Jen wrote a breakup letter to Mars Hill. The genre itself tells the tale. Mars Hill broke her heart.

For some, the years after Mars Hill have been a strange reckoning, an unraveling even, where they've had to make sense of the pain they experienced, as well as the pain they inflicted.

Tim Smith was the pastor of Mars Hill Portland when the doors closed. He transitioned the campus, planting Trinity Church in 2015, and pastored there until 2018 when Trinity merged with another church called Door of Hope. He was a pastor on staff there until about nine months ago, and now he finds himself asking a lot of big questions.

 @TimAndSmith

**Tim Smith:** The last time I attended a church that I wasn't on staff at, I was 23 and it was half my life ago. So it's a very disorienting, strange time. And yeah, I'm trying to figure out my relationship with the church. It's hard to know exactly where I fit. I don't know whether in this time I'm preparing to be a pastor again, or whether out of repentance in some way, I should walk away from ministry for the rest of my life. And I go back and forth in those two ideas pretty regularly, sometimes multiple times a day.

**Mike Cosper:** I asked him to elaborate on that last thought. What made him think he might be disqualified?

110 MIN

**Tim Smith:** There's one specific situation that I think back on often, and without going into too many specifics, it was just... It was a conversation I was in with a leader at Mars Hill Portland, and we were scheduling a meeting with some other leaders at some point. And I think this other guy suggested something to the extent of when it would be a good time for everybody else to meet, but it was at a time that I didn't want to meet. And I remember responding to him and saying, Well, I'm not gonna meet then, and he's like, Well, that's best for them. And I said, What's best for me is what's best for the church. And I haven't talked about that publicly yet. Sometimes we say things in a conversation that you may or may not, like, truly fully believe down to your core, but that's splitting hairs. I said it nonetheless. And I think back on that often as just representative of the extent to which I internalized this mindset that Mark had, that became so pervasive in Mars Hill. The friends that I have shared that with have gone long and hard to reassure me that that's not exactly who I am, they didn't see me that way then, they don't see me that way now. And I appreciate that. But the bottom line is I still said

that and I still felt that way, and that to me is like representative of a whole bunch of other things I did over time to where I did take on way too much of this arrogance, and I'm so ashamed that I said that. And I'm so ashamed of how I internalized that. I'm so ashamed of how wrongly I found my value and worth in my position at the church in a way that came out in so much pride and arrogance. Still question what my part in the rest of it was, how deeply that has marked me, and whether it disqualifies me from being in leadership in a healthy way. If I end up walking away from church leadership and such, I think that will be part of it.

**Mike Cospers:** For quite a few former Mars Hill pastors, there was a kind of cloud around them, an uncertainty about if they could trust themselves, an ambiguity about where they stood with each other.

Joel Brown was one of the pastors to ride things out to the very end, and went on to serve in one of the 11 churches planted out of Mars Hill.

 @bJoelBrown

**Joel Brown:** I connected with kind of an old acquaintance when I moved back to west Seattle last year, and he's a pastor at an Anglican church here. And we were talking and we were just talking about the collapse of Mars Hill and stuff like that, and he goes... And I was talking mostly about all the terrible things, probably partially because of the shame, because I was afraid of what he was gonna think of me, because I hadn't talked to him since all that had happened. And he goes, Yeah, well, that stuff's true, and you need to look at all the mess and really reckon with it and face it. And at the same time he goes, Some of our most committed and invested people in our church came from Mars Hill, from the fallout of Mars Hill.

**Mike Cospers:** It's also taken significant work to get the old Mars Hill pastors into the rooms together to talk about what happened and why.

**Joel Brown:** Aaron Gray actually invited, I don't know, it was like 25, 30 former Mars Hill pastors, to come to his church and to just get around in a circle and talk. And those of us who enjoy pain decided that we wanted to come and do that, and I was really surprised and thankful. A lot of guys showed up. This was in 2017. And we're sitting around talking about what do we make of the collapse of Mars Hill and stuff. This is two and a half years later. And it was so cool to see the conversation eventually lead to one kind of group of pastors saying, I'm sorry I judged you guys for staying. And then another group of pastors saying, I'm sorry I judged you guys for leaving. And so it helped me to also crystallize why it was that those of us who stayed had stayed, and that was that we had walked with people through all kinds of incredible work of God's redemption for decades. We had a front row seat to see God working in people's lives, and we had to ask the question, Is God done working among this people, is God done working in this place. And we came to the end of it and we said, No, He's not. And that included us as pastors, right? Knowing that we needed to go through a process of redemptive work of God or else we were gonna end up basically back where we were with Mars Hill again in the future.

**Mike Cospers:** Near the top of my list of people I wanted to be sure I interviewed was Sutton Turner. I'd known him only by reputation prior to beginning the research for this

podcast, and not in a positive sense. When I said in Episode 10 that there are people who see him as the true villain in this story, that's not hyperbole. A lot of people felt that way. Some used those exact words. He was the guy who slashed budgets, fired people and used intimidation tactics to maintain order. People called him a mafia enforcer or a cold-blooded killer.

And then a few months into my reporting. Jen Smidt told the story about her conversation with Sutton, and the resulting fallout where she was shut out of ministry for months. But she added this little aside at the end:



**Jen Smidt:** I could not tell the story of really the exiling of me as a woman and who dared to speak, without telling the story of reconciliation with Sutton Turner.

**Mike Cosper:** It genuinely surprised me. And she went on to tell a story that I heard different versions of several times in the months ahead. Because it turned out that Sutton Turner had been on a journey himself.

@suttonturner

**Sutton Turner:** In the spring of 2019, I just started to pray and really starting to write my thoughts about what I had just walked through. And at the time I was seeing a biblical counselor and she really was very, very helpful in me trying to take some of my emotions and put them down on paper.

**Mike Cosper:** Sutton ended up publishing those on his blog as reflections about his time at Mars Hill.

115 MIN

**Sutton Turner:** And that led me also to fly back - because I was living in Texas - fly back to Seattle for three days. I scheduled a meeting every two hours at Panera Bread, and all the people that had reached out to me during those last couple of years saying that I had sinned against them, saying that I had hurt them, those type, those were the people that I met with first. And some of those would be Mars Hill staffers that had left during that time period, and Mars Hill elders that had left during those time periods.

**Mike Cosper:** To be sure, not everyone was eager to meet, and not everyone who was willing to meet was eager to forgive.

**Sutton Turner:** First of all, they didn't believe that I was sincere, and they didn't trust me at all. I remember one time going to Capitol Hill, I met with a former staffer and his wife and we met for three hours, and at the end of that, I was trying to reconcile and they weren't ready. They were not ready to forgive me. And then literally years later, I'm in Texas and I get a phone call from that person saying, Hey, I forgive you. And that's how he started off the phone call.

**Mike Cosper:** At the same time that Sutton was beginning these conversations, Jen was processing her own grief and wounds, and Sutton heard her telling her story on a podcast and felt an urgency about reconnecting and reconciling. So he reached out to her and asked if she'd be willing to meet.

**Jen Smidt:** I heard about, for lack of a better term, your repentance tour that you did

through Seattle, and I remember feeling deeply hurt that I was not someone - I didn't make the list. So when I did get a message from you, Sutton, that said, Hey, I'd like to talk, I was terrified and shocked and amazed. Phil has always said to me, like, Jen I feel like for me, my definition of repentance is something that's surprising and refreshing out of somebody. And for you to reach out to me was surprising and refreshing. It felt like a humble move, it felt like you were willing to talk to me as a woman and not as a woman that you had first interpreted as being threatening. So I really greatly appreciated that.

**Sutton Turner:** It was not like I called Jen up and I repented and she accepted my repentance. That didn't restore trust. I mean, it was a... It's been a process, and a beautiful process I might add.

**Jen Smidt:** I would agree with that. And, woo, I'm taken aback again. And so I'm feeling competing emotions right now, because I literally have I think both dreamt and day dreamt of this happening, this conversation.

**Mike Cosper:** Probably the strongest words you've heard about Sutton came on our last episode from Jesse Bryan, but they too have reconnected, revisited the stories, and reconciled.

**Jesse Bryan:** So Sutton and I have been talking and it's actually been really good from the standpoint of, we can finally have conversations. One of the things that Mark was really great at is he would pitch you against people. It's almost like, this guy thinks he'd do better at his job than you are. And then he'd go to the other guy and be like, this guy thinks he's better at your job. And then you'd be like, Oh yeah. And then all of a sudden, what he's getting is more results because of the friction he's creating between people. So I was seeing all these orders coming down and I was like, Who is this guy, Sutton, making these calls, we don't know him, yada, yada. In hindsight it's obvious, where you're like, he couldn't have made those calls. Sutton couldn't have made those calls, that's not how it works. And so lately, yeah, we've been having conversations and we've really been able to find common ground around this stuff. For me, it's actually just made it clearer and clearer just how - to be honest with you, and this probably sounds naive - I think that probably occurred to me back then, but I thought, Mark would never do that, certainly no one would ever do that, he wouldn't do that, we're friends, like nobody would do that. It's like, a hundred percent he would do that. Yes, absolutely he would do that, actively. He would actively do those things if he thought it would allow him to get a little bit more power control or anything like that. And so I'm glad. And honestly, this whole podcast, I've had a lot of conversations with people I haven't talked to in years, and people have had serious fallout and problems, and it's been... I'm glad that it's reconnected some of those dots so that at least, I don't know, I can have good relationships with as... Live in peace with as many people as I can.

**Mike Cosper:** Sutton has continued that work, including while this podcast has been releasing. And with the work comes continual reckoning with the responsibilities for not only the things he did directly, but also for the passive role he played in a toxic system where things were going wrong all around him.

This next audio is from that same conversation. We had some technical issues, so it sounds a little different.

**Sutton Turner:** So much hurt happened by me not doing anything, and allowing things to happen and unravel. Biblically I know that the Lord has taken that sin, and biblically I know and I have faith that Jesus takes my shame, but there's times, like talking about it right now, I feel very shameful.

**Jen Smidt:** Yeah, I appreciate that. And I hear that, Sutton, and I have my own 18 years worth of stacked up stories of where I didn't say something and I participated and all of that. But what we are attempting to do by actually having individual one on one conversations with people is we're actually offering dignity. That's where healing happens, not over a podcast, not a blanket statement of, I love you or I'm sorry, but I'm specific looking another human in the eye and saying, I did not love you, I didn't give you dignity, I didn't listen to you, you were a threat and you had to be dealt with. And that's what I see differently in you now, because you eliminated a lot of threats on a very inhumane and undignified way, as you were carrying out orders in the time that you were here at Mars Hill, and I see and hear you now attempting to offer honesty and humility and dignity to people that were deeply wounded, and for that, I am grateful.

**Sutton Turner:** Thank you, Jen. I appreciate that. Means a lot to me.

**Jen Smidt:** To state the obvious, that just has not happened from Mark and Grace, and that is what this collective exhaustion and grief I think is still about. This story, while it has beautiful moments of redemption and reconciliation, which is why I wanted to be able to talk with you, Sutton, in general, this story is still undone and ongoing, and I think continues to be grievous while also having lovely glimpses of the joy that you and I enjoy now, Sutton, of being able to talk and be honest about what we've both done.

**Mike Cosper:** While there certainly are people who'd love nothing more than to enact some kind of revenge against Driscoll for their hurt, the majority of those who sat for interviews would share Jen's sentiment. The abiding, ongoing pain of the Mars Hill experience is in part the absence of resolution from Mark. He made a couple of media appearances, nodded vaguely at some immaturity and some anger, but he never acknowledged the names, faces, families, and lives that were in that pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus. And he certainly didn't meet them face to face.

There are hundreds, maybe thousands of others who answered his call over the years to give their lives to Mars Hill, a church he said had a special anointing from God, and then they watched it crumble when he abandoned it, and never heard an honest answer about why he left and what to make of all of his broken promises.

We've talked a lot about the role of media at Mars Hill, its power in shaping the faith and imaginations of the church. We haven't talked much about its power in shaping Mark himself, though. More than any time prior in history, he had the ability to tailor and curate his image, and he had the talent around him to do so at an elite level. We should ask though, what does that do to his soul?



 @nickbogardus

Here's Nick Bogardus, who served in Media and Communications before pastoring Mars Hill Orange County.

**Nick Bogardus:** Malcolm Muggeridge, he was essentially like the Anderson Cooper of his time in England, in the 1960s, it was contemporary to Tolkien and Lewis. He tells a story about how he came to do a TV interview with some high ranking, like, political official or someone. And so he describes the experience of coming into the TV studio and sitting in a makeup chair for two hours, and then going and sitting in the studio and then turning on the lights, and then the producer yells, All right, action. Then he does 10 minutes of this interview, and someone yells, Cut. And then Muggeridge describes what happens right after cut is that he lets out this deep exhale, this coming down. And he said, And that's when I realized that I was wearing a mask. And when you are in any kind of visual media like that, you can be performing without even recognizing that you're performing, and you can then end up living with that mask that you put on in front of the camera, in other spheres of your life.

And it's a really, again, profound insight that it wasn't just the story that was shaped by the media, and it wasn't just the people of the church that was shaped, it was Mark that was shaped by the media. The size and scope of it allowed permission to ignore hard truths in the name of the mission. Like, look at how many people we're reaching, let's not talk about it, that's hard stuff, because we're reaching those people, whatever. And that's not helpful to him.

125 MIN

Our friend David Zahl makes this great point that the longer that you live with a mask, the greater the void grows between the mask and the internal reality of who you are. And that void becomes vacuous and empty and hollow, and ultimately you end up being loved for something you're not, rather than who you actually are. And so the media forming that in him in return, like, I think it would be sad to consider how that might have done that to him. Like, to be loved not for who he actually might be, but just because of what he can do on a stage, that's lonely and sad.

**Mike Cosper:** I would have loved to have asked Mark about that, about what it's like to live with the projected expectations of 15,000 church members, and hundreds of thousands of online listeners who see you as their spiritual authority. That has to rewire your brain, and not for the better. We never heard back from Mark, though, in spite of several efforts to connect with him and sit down with him for an interview or for comment. We'd also hoped to have some other conversations with pastors and leaders who served alongside Mark or who shared their platforms with him. Requests for interviews with Matt Chandler, John Piper and Tim Keller were all declined, as well as requests for interviews with leaders from Acts 29.

There are quite a few conversations I wish we could have had, and there remain many unanswered questions. There are also people who are continuing the work to seek out answers. The history of Mars Hill in some ways is common, but in many ways it's wholly unique. Along with the bloggers who've been watchdogs about the goings on of Driscoll in the years since, there are other websites devoted to preserving the legacy of Mars Hill. Not in a way that's whitewashing, but more like a museum artifact.

 @vadermeer

Marshall.com got purchased somehow after 2015, and let's just say, it's a bad neighborhood over there now. But if you go to Marshall.se, you'll see a frozen in time snapshot of the Mars Hill website the day that it closed its doors. I was able to connect with the owner and manager of the site, who communicated both via a third party and through an anonymous email account. They're preserving their anonymity out of concerns over intellectual property liability. But they described the process of recreating the site, and not just the shell, but rebuilding most of the links and rebuilding the archive of video and audio content. It was painstaking work that took place over the course of more than two years.

Marshallwas.com is a directory that archives and organizes Mars Hill-related materials from all over the internet. That site is owned and maintained by a former member of the church whose name might be familiar if you've listened to our closing credits, Ben Vandermeer.

**Ben Vandermeer:** As the church was shutting down, and then of course once it did, a lot of the material was just gone. They started taking series of sermons off, probably for good reason, beforehand, and then once it was gone it was gone. It's not so much to keep a record as a gotcha for Driscoll, but it's mostly just people may want to know, What was that we experienced, how did we get here? And you just can't go figure that out now. If you allow the people recording the material to be the ones dictating who hears what. I mean, if anything exemplifies why capturing this material is important, if you type in [youtube.com/mhcseattle](https://youtube.com/mhcseattle), it goes to Mark Driscoll's current YouTube channel. So he took that with him and all the content that was... talked so highly of as God working in Seattle, that was just gone.

**Mike Cospes:** Recently, Ben purchased a URL that was also associated with the church, Marshallglobal.com. It's the home to a survey conducted in 2016, that was a way for former members to share their stories. They can still share their stories there now. I think the existence of these sites and others that continue to pop up from time to time is an ongoing testimony to both how important people's time was at Mars Hill, and how surreal the sudden ending was. There's a sense of urgency about preserving the memory of what happened.

As we've noted before, it's easy from the distance of years and miles to see Mars Hill's flaws. But when it's the church where you found community, got married, had kids, it's a whole different thing. Many of the artifacts of that community lived online, and they were either gonna be memory holed or scrubbed and repackaged as part of Driscoll's new brand. These sites exist to preserve what would very quickly and easily be lost, a kind of testimony to the mixture of gratitude and grief that remained after Mars Hill closed.

For Jen Zug, gratitude also remains part of the equation.

**Jen Zug:** I'm still thankful for the time at Mars Hill because it doesn't change where I was when I was in my twenties, doesn't change where I was fumbling through the meaning of life. And I felt like at that time, I understood how the gospel flows through my veins, and it's a part of me and it doesn't have to look a certain way, I don't have to

say the right words, I don't have to dress a certain way. It just is a part of who I am, and I can be myself within that.

**Mike Cospers:** Jen will be at Qwest Church on Sunday. Some former members, though, will be staying as far from the church as they can.

**Mike Anderson:** I don't know how you can take the Bible literally and not end up where we were.

**Mike Cospers:** Others are still working things out.

**Michelle:** You can't take someone's foundation outside of them or use it against them and expect there to be no consequence. There just is, and there's fallout. And here we are seven years after having left Mars Hill, and I'm still trying to navigate my faith and determine, What do I really believe. Would I even call myself a Christian? Probably not, but I still feel that. I'm like, I know that there's just something in me that believes in a Creator. The fact that that has been tampered with is really upsetting.

**Mike Cospers:** There's a grief over the fall of Mars Hill that leads some to ask whether or not the church is simply missing the point.

**Jesse Bryan:** If you gave people a transcendent experience that helped them remind them that there's a God in the universe that loves them and is actively present in their lives and for them, and then you say, Hey, can you help us put chairs away, people will go, Okay. If you give them 90 minutes of cotton candy [CENSORED], and then say, Not only do I need you to put the chairs away, I also need you to be here Wednesday night to make sure the bowling alley has enough bowling oil so that we can use it, and then I need somebody to do set-up/tear-down for the ice skating rink out in the [CENSORED] parking lot or whatever, you go, Great, is that the purpose of this building? Let's keep the main thing the main thing. What is the main thing? We've so dumbed down everything that it's like, Thank you for even giving us a chance to come here on Sunday and watch our circus. It feels desperate instead of feeling like, is this a hospital for broken people? Yeah, of course, there's water here.

**Mike Cospers:** Part of what drew me to this project was my own history. The fact that even from a distance, I heard echoes of my experience in the stories coming out of Mars Hill. The more time I spent with that story, and especially the more time I spent with these people, the louder those echoes got. Now, having seen this story go back out into the world, I've genuinely wept at how many others are hearing their experience reflected here, too.

**Jen Smidt:** I'm exhausted and I wanna close my eyes and move on, and yet I really do have faith and a love for Christ and a love for humans that compels me to say, Why does this story play out in other churches, why are we not looking at the deep seated reasons for this, and why are we not all claiming the power of God in our lives to actually own what we've done wrong, own where we were ambitious for the wrong reasons, own where we made it about us and not about God, and actually address that. Because I think that is far more christlike and church-like, that's far more compelling than con-

tinuing a system that at times at its core, I think, is very sick.

**Mike Cospers:** History tells us that empires fall, and in this day and age, when an empire like Driscoll's falls, the stories hit the headlines, we take in the details, and then we move along. The guy at the center usually moves along too, sometimes accompanied by the sound of a standing ovation, though the applause comes cheap and from a great distance away.

Sometimes it's also accompanied by a conspiracy of politeness. Some combination of fear of repercussions, love of second chances, and misplaced loyalty causes leaders and fellow travelers to keep their heads down, offer platitudes, and to whatever degree it's possible, cheer the fallen on to his or her next stage. But in the background, in the ashes where the church once stood, is a bewildered community, wondering what went wrong.

The temptation for outsiders is to show up and point to all the good things that remain, which often is true, lots of good remains. But if someone is bleeding, it does them no good to point to all the people who aren't. It helps no one to put a decorative bow on a wound.

135 MIN

**Nate Burke:** It feels like, Yeah, we can tell some positive stories, but let's deal with the freaking... There is a wolf loose in the pen. Like the sheep have scattered to the wind. The positive story out of this for me is the people that I got to know and the people that I love. But that's part of what makes me angry, is seeing them get chopped up, is seeing them however many years later, still being hurt and hearing their stories, and for Mark not giving a shit. And you tell me that's a shepherd? That's not shepherd, that's a wolf. So yeah, that's a hard story. Do I wish that there was some other positive angle or we could go... Of course I do. But that's a frustrating thing to hear, because that's the... Even the positive of the story reminds you of the pain. It reminds me of what I lost, which was connection with all of those wonderful people. And strangely, through this podcast, I've gotten to reconnect with some of them, a lot of them including Sutton, who I never thought that would've happened.

But let's pause for a second there, let it sink in that this is hard and it's chronic, and why is this the group of people that if somebody just sprinkles verses in and cries every once in a while, again, crying for the consequences of their own actions and their inability to run rampant anymore, why can we not just pause on that for a second and deal with the wolf problem, and savvy up. Like, innocent as doves and shrewd as serpents. Get shrewd, people. And then that's a good story, that's a positive story. We stop listening to people like that. Because we were warned, Jesus warned us.

**Mike Cospers:** A culture change like that demands a reckoning of sorts, probably starting with a time for grief and maybe turning our expectations on their heads about what the Christian life is supposed to look like. Maybe it's less like cotton candy and bowling, and as Ben Petry describes, more of a journey into the darkness.

**Benjamin Petry:** I mean, Jesus died on the cross. Jesus died. I think in a lot of ways you have to die to be able to live. And I look at my parents' story and I think that honestly, I think their story is like...The greatest thing out of this whole catastrophe is that they

were able to... they were able to make it through it. And there were a lot of people that we'll never know that weren't able to make it through it.

**Mike Cospers:** Lindsay's journey through suffering and spiritual darkness began a decade ago before the collapse of Mars Hill. But even then, in spite of so many obstacles, there were flashes of light that broke through.

**Lindsay:** I remember there were a couple of times where I felt like Jesus spoke through Mark despite himself, and I felt kind of this calling, but it was always like this kind of still small voice, gentle voice kind of calling, like some passages of scripture would be like, I'm gentle, lowly of heart. And then there's verses about how He cares for a broken reed. These things that were just in complete juxtaposition, I still felt calling to me through all of it and afterwards that were very healing.

**Mike Cospers:** Tim Smith is haunted too. He stepped away from ministry, he's reckoning with decades of his own suffering and his own sin, uncoupling his identity from his position as a pastor, and it feels like he's flying without a net.

**Tim Smith:** If Jesus came today in America, we would do to Him the same thing that Jewish leaders did back in his day, because we have a counterfeit version of the faith based on other values than what Jesus has. And if Jesus showed up, He wouldn't keep us in power the way we want to be, and we would kill him. So I don't know that we need to break up with Jesus as much as we need to break up and acknowledge the sense in which the American Evangelical version of the Church of His name has just become so distorted and deceived, and has adopted so many values that are contrary to Him. We need to follow Jesus, is what we need to do. And it feels like to me, the scene in John chapter 6, where Jesus says some hard things and it says many of His disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him. And He turns to the 12 and He says, Do you want to leave too? And Peter's answer is my answer. I don't know what to do, but where else am I gonna go? There's nobody like Jesus.

**Mike Cospers:** Our story ends here with the fall of Mars Hill, with a scattered community where some are making beauty from ashes, some have disappeared into sad and broken places, and some are still here but just trying to get by. Jesus seems to haunt these spaces and everyone in this story, though sometimes He remains entangled with the caricature they heard from Mark.

I'd love to hear that someday soon, Driscoll took up Benjamin's invitation and called Paul Petry. I'd love to find out that that was the first in a series of conversations marked by brokenness, repentance, grace, and humility. That's the heart of the gospel, and I know I'm not alone in hoping that its power gets put to work. Whether that reconciliation happens or not, I do know that nine churches once affiliated with Mars Hill will gather next Sunday to sing, take communion and hear the word of God. I know that hundreds of Acts 29 churches will as well. It's hard to even begin to know how many hundreds or thousands of churches around the world will sing songs written by Mars Hill musicians like Zach Bolen, Joe Day, Brian Eichelberger, Cam Huxford, Chad Gardner, or one of the many more.

Some former Mars Hill members will gather in homes doing church very simply as they continue to reconstruct their faith. Some can't walk through the doors of a church yet without physical symptoms of fear and anxiety. Some haven't found spiritual homes at all since leaving Mars Hill, and some have embraced a life without faith. Others tragically have been captured by despair, fallen sick with addiction, even taken their lives.

As I've said before, there are as many stories as there were people, and when I tried to hold together both the beautiful and the sad, I confess I feel a deep melancholy, and I kind of think that's right. That's how it's supposed to be when we hold together goodness and brokenness. Where these stories go from here, I don't know, but I'm eager to see. And we may return to this story ourselves at some date in the future. What I do know is that despite the insistence that it might be otherwise, there's life and faith and community to be found outside the grip of an unhealthy church. And people are finding that now.

**Nate Burke:** I might have told you this, I was texting with Sutton about this. Mark used to say there was a special protection over Mars Hill. Has anyone ever talked to you about this? And that seemed like hogwash to me at the time, but the thought of that can seep in. You're like, Maybe it is, maybe, I'm not so sure, Like, what happens if I go outside of this. And it's just like now having been outside of it and be like, Life persists. And when we all get together without him and not in that context, you still feel that energy, that good energy. Good happens, God is still present. And that's a cool thing to be reminded of.

**Mike Cospers:** Wherever one may be on the spiritual landscape, I hope those words can strike a chord. Good still happens, and God is still present. It's an idea that's foundational for faith and for rebuilding faith, reminding us that life with God isn't mediated by charismatic individuals or broken institutions. It's an idea that Paul talked about in the book of Acts, telling a group of Athenians that all they enjoyed came from God, that He wasn't far off, and in fact, they lived, moved and had their being in Him. He gave the speech at the Areopagus, a rock outcropping outside the city, famous for intellectual debates, and named for Ares, the Greek god of war. It was sometimes referred to by that god's Roman name. In that case, they called it Mars Hill.

**Mike Cospers:** Thanks for listening. I know I say that at the end of every episode, but as we wrap up this story, I just wanna reiterate that we really are grateful that you've accompanied us on this journey. I especially want to say thanks to the people of Mars Hill Church who've shared their stories so generously and vulnerably. That's a sacred trust, not just for me, but for all of us who you've allowed to listen.

We have some bonus episodes in production and they'll be coming in the not too distant future, but we'll update you with specifics as the time gets closer. Keep an eye on your feed here, or keep an eye on CT's social media.

Many of you have asked what's coming next, and we have some ideas about that that we're pretty excited about, but nothing to share yet. So keep an eye out here and at CT's social media. We'll be sure to let you know when we have news.

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As we end 2021, we'd love to invite you to join us as we continue to try to tell stories like this, and we also would love it if you considered us with your year-end giving.

The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill is a production of Christianity Today. It's executive produced by Erik Petrik. It's produced, written and edited by Mike Cospers. Joy Beth Smith is our associate producer. Music and sound design by Kate Siefker. Mixing by Mike Cospers. Our theme song for the Aftermath is Resplendent by Bill Mallonee and the Vigilantes of Love. The closing song this week is All My Favorite People, by Over the Rhine.

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