



Who Killed Mars Hill?

Almost overnight, after 18 years of ministry, Mars Hill Church closed its doors. The first episode of our new podcast asks who's to blame.

SHOW NOTES

In 2014, after more than a decade of tremendous growth and ministry, Mars Hill Church imploded with the resignation of its lead pastor, Mark Driscoll. Once a hub for those disenfranchised with cultural Christianity, Mars Hill's characteristic "punk rock spirit" became its downfall as power, fame, and spiritual trauma invaded the ministry. But how did things fall apart? Where did Mark Driscoll take a wrong turn? Who could be held responsible for the hurt and disillusionment that resulted?

In this inaugural episode of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, host Mike Cospers begins at the end, investigating the rubble of Mars Hill's fall for answers. Meet Mark, the firebrand "cussing pastor" whose ministry of breaking conventions called men and women to transformation and whose rebellion touched a nerve with those inside and outside the church. Meet a church culture that considered relational fallout as simply part of the job. And take a look in the mirror to ask why we keep doing this—elevating leaders whose charisma outpaces their character.

Loaded with piercing and poignant interviews, this episode invites you to release preconceived notions about this familiar story and listen afresh to a narrative that feels painfully relevant more than a decade later.

LINKS

[Here](#) is the letter presenting formal charges against Mark Driscoll from 21 former Mars Hill pastors.

[Here](#) is the letter from nine pastors who were serving in August of 2014, asking Mark Driscoll to step down from ministry and enter a restoration process.

MASTHEAD

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

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 @TimAndSmith

Mike Cospser: Let's begin at the end.

Tim Smith: The thought never once came to mind that Mark would resign.

 @MikeCospser

Mike Cospser: This is Tim Smith talking about events that took place in the fall of 2014. Tim was a 16-year veteran on the staff at Mars Hill, Seattle, and a longtime friend and ally of its pastor, Mark Driscoll.

Tim Smith: It wasn't even a possibility in my mind. I had heard Driscoll preach from the front at conferences and sermons on Sunday that he started this church, that God called him here, that he was never going to leave it. That he'd preach his own funeral, get into the casket and close his own coffin on himself. But he sent a letter at some point earlier in the day on Tuesday, the 14th. I think the Board of Advisors spent most of that day trying to talk him out of it, from what they told me. But by Tuesday night, I think it was clear that he was serious.

Mike Cospser: At its peak, the church had nearly 15,000 people in 15 locations, and Driscoll's sermons were being downloaded by the millions. But for years, conflict had been brewing inside Mars Hill, largely centered on Mark and the culture of leadership around him. There were accusations of bullying, domineering, leveraging the church to build a personal brand, intimidation, and even violence. Mark had been on leave and under investigation by the elders of the church when he submitted his resignation. So on Sunday, October 19th, 2014, Tim got up to address the congregation he pastored at Mars Hill Church in Portland, Oregon.

Tim Smith: I began by just letting everybody know that Mark had resigned, that it was a shock to everyone involved. But then I read this statement: "The investigation of formal charges against Martin Driscoll revealed patterns of persistent sin in the areas of arrogance, a quick temper, and domineering leadership." It was a really heavy day.

Mike Cospser: From Christianity Today, this is Mike Cospser and you're listening to the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. It's the story of one church that grew from a handful of people to a movement, and then collapsed almost overnight. It's a story about power, fame and spiritual trauma. Problems faced across the spectrum of churches in America. And yet it's also a story about the mystery of God working in broken places. On this episode, we're looking backward and we're asking, Who killed Mars Hill? Let's back the clock up about six weeks.

 @PastorMark

Mark Driscoll: If you would just give me a bit more of your time. I prepared a statement that I would like to read.

Mike Cospser: It's August 24th, 2014. Mark had actually already been out of the pulpit for most of the summer. For the past couple of years, the church had been giving Mark a break over the summers, inviting people like Bruce Ware, Bryan Chapell, and Jack Graham to come and preach their best sermons. So this was actually Driscoll's first week back. The statement itself is pretty long; it's about 17 minutes, and you can find the whole thing online. But to sum it up a bit, Mark begins by speaking from the heart about his love for Mars Hill and his gratitude for all that God's done there.

Mark Driscoll: When a small group of us started what would become Mars Hill in 1996, we could not have dreamed it would be what it is today. Thousands upon thousands of people have become Christians as the gospel of Jesus Christ has proven powerful over and over. Thank you. I genuinely mean this. Thank you for being a wonderful church family.

Mike Cospers: He goes on to acknowledge that it's a tumultuous time at Mars Hill, and he takes responsibility for some of the conflict. He's specific about one thing in particular: A series of comments he made on a message board about 15 years earlier. But for the most part, his acknowledgement of fault is pretty broad, pretty vague.

Mark Driscoll: God is not honored by conflict, strife, disunity, arguing, slander, gossip, or anything else that is inconsistent with the Fruit of the Spirit, and I am deeply, genuinely sorry for the times I have not done my part to live peaceably with all men.

Mike Cospers: This announcement was sparked a few days earlier by a letter that had been submitted to the Board of Advisors and Accountability at Mars Hill, a group of men tasked with overseeing Mark and the church's executive elders.

The letter detailed accusations that included slander, violent threats, domineering, and more. It's 11 pages long, and you'll find the link to it in our show notes. It includes specific examples, context, theological definitions and resources. It was signed by 21 former pastors from the church, but it didn't just come out of the blue. Mars Hill and Mark himself had always attracted a certain amount of controversy, but for the past two years there had been mounting pressure from both inside and outside the church, and it was reaching a crescendo that August. Just a few weeks earlier, Acts 29 - the church planting network founded by Mars Hill - had kicked Driscoll and Mars Hill out, citing ungodly and disqualifying behavior.

A second letter had been submitted as well. This one from nine current pastors at the church, essentially echoing and amplifying the concerns of the first. In response, Mark was announcing that he was taking a temporary leave of absence from leadership, while a group of elders assigned by the board would look into the details of the charges leveled against him.

Mark Driscoll: I invite this process rather than debating accusations and issues in social media or the court of public opinion.

Mike Cospers: He ends with this:

Mark Driscoll: As I look forward to the future - and I do look forward to it - I believe the Lord has shown me I am to do two things with the rest of my life: Love my family, and teach the Bible.

(clapping)

Mike Cospers: That applause you hear, it matters. It isn't just a polite response. These folks loved Mark, and that's a really critical piece of the puzzle when you try to understand

what happened at Mars Hill. Mark was a firebrand, and he attracted a lot of outside criticism over the years for his language, his attitude, his views on masculinity and sexuality, and his general posture towards the world. But if you were inside Mars Hill, those things were features, not bugs. They were part of why you wanted to be there.

Joel Brown: I think a lot of who we were good at reaching were kids like me.

Mike Cosper: This is Joel Brown. Joel served as a staff member and later a pastor, from about 1999 all the way to the end of Mars Hill.

Joel Brown: People who were a little bit disenfranchised with cultural Christianity and had a little bit of that punk rock spirit, and I would say most people had some sort of heart of rebellion that we wanted to break conventions inside or outside of the church.

Mike Cosper: Mars Hill embodied that spirit in many ways. The music, the aesthetics, the way they issued certain norms and ministry. Everything had an air of that punk rock spirit, but most of all it was embodied by Mark himself. Today, it's not uncommon to find pastors with a kind of personal brand. You see them on YouTube or Instagram, wearing expensive sneakers, hanging out with celebrities, taking selfies at hip bars and restaurants. There are whole social media channels like PreachersNSneakers devoted to pointing this stuff out too.

But when Mars Hill started 25 years ago, things were very, very different. The cool pastors at the time were guys who wore pleated khakis and Hawaiian shirts. They pastored churches that looked like cruise ships and preached in friendly, inviting ways. And out of that world comes Mark Driscoll. He's loud and angry. He talks about drinking beer and watching MMA. He preaches for an hour or more; long, fiery shouted sermons that talk about hell and judgment and blood and redemption at a time when the church growth experts around them are holding seminars on how to make your church more seeker sensitive. And he speaks to young men. But not first and foremost, in a 'you can do it, let's take the hill' kind of way. He attacks young men constantly for the way they've been lured by the surrounding culture into being passive, lazy and weak. For example, here's an excerpt from a sermon from November, 2009.

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Mark Driscoll: You want a guy you can marry and have babies with. You don't want to marry a guy who's a baby. This is unbelievable. I swear to you, I keep waiting to go to the mall and just I'm waiting for the day when guys are in strollers. Just with meat, binkies and sippy cups full of beer. And the girlfriends are like, Oh, he's nice, he's got potential. I think he's got a lot of potential. Oh, I messed, I messed. It's like, Good Lord.

Mike Cosper: The whole run of commentary about men is about twenty-five minutes long. Not the sermon, just this section. The sermon itself lasts an hour. And notice that he's funny, but not in the folksy or self-deprecating way that's common to preachers. He's like an insult comic, especially when he talks to young men. His cadence is like a stand-up comedian working the room, extending the laughs, moving people along. And if you listen to a lot of Mark's preaching at Mars Hill - and I've listened to a ton of it in the past year - you'll hear the same basic rant again and again.

It's part of the overall vision that Mark was trying to cast for the culture he wanted to see at the church. The world is a corrupting and dangerous place. It makes men weak, and it makes women and children vulnerable. But if men hear the gospel, repent of their sins and follow Jesus - Jesus the warrior and defender, the One who takes initiative and responsibility - then they can build families and communities, they can protect women and children, and they can transform and redeem the city. That's where he drives this sermon and how he ends it.

Mark Driscoll: God wants you to be his sons. God wants you to follow by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the example of Jesus, and in the example of John. I don't care if you buy a truck and you could play some video games and rock out on your guitar, I don't really care. But the issue is when those are prevalent, predominant, preeminent in your life. Some of you guys would argue with me and say, It's not a sin. No, but sometimes it's just stupid. You work one part-time job so you could play more guitar. That's dumb. That's really, really dumb. Some of you would say, Well, it's not a sin. Neither is eating your lawnmower. It's just dumb. Just dumb. Just doesn't do anything. See, men, you were to be creators and cultivators. If you want to image God, your God is a creator and a cultivator. You create a marriage, and you cultivate that woman. You create a child with her, and you cultivate that child. You create a new family legacy for generations and you cultivate it. You create a business and you cultivate it. You create a ministry and you cultivate it. You want to be a man? You're a creator and a cultivator. You're a producer, not a consumer. You're a giver, not a taker. You bring life, not death. You're not looking for the path of least resistance, you're looking for the path of greatest glory to God. And you take it like John did.

And ultimately what I want for you men is to be filled with the Holy Spirit like John. And I want you to be fathers like Zechariah, who are filled with the Spirit. And I want you to marry women like Elizabeth, who are filled with the Spirit. And I want you women to be filled with the Spirit like Elizabeth. And I want you to love and serve one another in God like Zechariah and Elizabeth did. And then I want you to give birth to children who are filled with the Spirit and serve Jesus like John did. And I want your life to be one of production, not just consumption, one of fruitfulness and faithfulness and not foolishness.

Mike Cospser: I think it's hard to overstate how resonant this message was at Mars Hill, and how central it was to the ministry and vision of the church. When you talk to people who were part of the church and ask, What made it tick, what made it work, you'll very quickly hear people talking about men answering the call to take responsibility for themselves, and marriages healing. Or families uniting around the gospel. Many of the pastors of Mars Hill talked about coming to the church as young men, dabbling in school or music, or even sometimes ministry, unsure of what they were doing with their lives. And frankly, not too worried about. But when they met Mark, when they heard him lay out this kind of big vision for what the church could be and do, it inspired them, it offered them something to give their lives away to. And it wasn't about giving themselves to Mark. That description would be way too simplistic. It was this bigger vision of masculinity and transformation powered by the gospel. Ed Stetzer is a researcher and missiologist at Wheaton College, and a leading thinker about American evangelicalism. In the earliest days of Mars Hill, he worked for the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, studying, supporting, and developing resources for church

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 @EdStetzer

planting. He was pretty involved at Mars Hill, as someone who coached and mentored Mark, preached in the church, and served in a variety of ways with Acts 29, including serving on their board.

Ed Stetzer: I saw stunning life change. There's a reason that 10,000 plus people engaged there and there's reasons why it ultimately imploded, and those reasons didn't always become simultaneously apparent. I think that's what people kind of assume, that you'd see all the good and the bad simultaneously. No, I think there were some people who were seeing the bad because they were living it and they were experiencing it. And I know a lot of people who have left the faith, people who are pastors are now not Christians because of their experience in those contexts. And then I know countless numbers of people who were just in lives that were just a mess and were redeemed by the power of the gospel and changed at Mars Hill, and have moved from there. But again, you could have lived as people did and had very different experiences and very different impact on your life, depending upon what part of the orbit you were in or not in at Mars Hill.

Mike Cosper: That contradiction is the center of the Mars Hill story. Stunning life change and stunning pain. Radical transformation and wounds so deep. They drove people from the church or from the faith altogether. And the connection between those two realities is critical. Those who were walking wounded after their time at Mars Hill wouldn't have those wounds if they hadn't first experienced something profound at the church. And in a twisted way, that pain wouldn't have been tolerated over the years if there hadn't been a sense of kingdom advancement.

As we ask who killed Mars Hill, we have to look at the character issues that led to Mark's leave of absence and resignation. And we'll do that a lot as this series goes on. But you have to ask bigger questions too. Questions about the culture of a church that tolerated and even enabled that behavior for years.

Here's how Joe Day, a worship leader who was on staff for a decade there, described it:

 @JoeDay

Joe Day: The prevailing justification for pretty much all the carnage that happened within Mars Hill was, Hey, look at the fruit. Look at all the people that are coming to Christ. Look at all the people that are being baptized. Look at all these stories of redemption. Could those things be real if Mark was off the rails? And eventually, that became Mark himself. There was a Mars Hill training day where Mark got up and talked for about an hour about he is the brand, and our role is essentially to bring people in the doors so that Mark can preach to them, because he's more effective than everybody else. It was blunt.

Mark Driscoll: Too many guys waste too much time trying to move stiff-necked, stubborn, obstinate people. I am all about blessed subtraction.

Mike Cosper: This is from a Church Planters Boot Camp in October, 2007. The day before, Mark and the executive team had fired two elders who'd raised objections to changes in the church governance policy.

Mark Driscoll: There is a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus, and by God's grace it'll be a mountain by the time we're done. You either get on the bus or you get run over

by the bus. Those are the options. But the bus ain't gonna stop. This is what we're doing.

There's a few kinds of people. There's people who get in the way of the bus, they got to get run over. There are people who want to take turns driving the bus, they got to get thrown off because they want to go somewhere else. There are people who will be on the bus, leaders and helpers and servants - they're awesome. There's also just sometimes nice people who sit on the bus and shut up. They're not helping or hurting, just let them ride along.

You know what I'm saying? But they'll look at the nice people. They're just going to sit on the bus and shut her mouth and think, I need you to lead the mission. They're never going to. You need to gather a whole new core. I'll tell you guys what too, you don't do this just for your church planning or replanting, I'm doing it right now. I'm doing it right now. We just took certain guys and rearranged the seats on the bus. Yesterday we fired two elders for the first time in the history of Mars Hill last night. They're off the bus, under the bus. They were off mission, so now they're unemployed.

Mike Cospers: For a long time at Mars Hill, there was a tolerance for this sort of thing. Like many organizations, the relational fallout from people being run over by the bus was just part of doing business. But as the years went on, as that pile of dead bodies grew higher and higher, the tolerance lowered and a consensus grew inside the church that there had to be change. Part of the solution was simply that Mark became more and more insulated from other people. Separate offices, limited access, changing phone numbers and email addresses. And part of it came with intentional efforts to recruit help for healing the wounds.

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One of those involved Paul David Tripp, a respected biblical counselor and author who had years of experience working with church leaders. He joined the board of advisors in November, 2013, and worked for eight months trying to facilitate a reconciliation process between Driscoll and those who were expressing concerns and hurt. But he resigned the board eight months later in July of 2014. When he did, it was big news covered in many major news outlets because of the bad omen it seemed to be for Mars Hill. Shortly after that, at retreat for Mars Hills lead pastors, a group of them gathered in the conference room and called him, looking for guidance and hoping to see a way forward. Tripp was not optimistic.

 @PaulTripp

Paul Tripp: This is without a doubt the most abusive coercive ministry culture I've ever been involved with. In fact, I would say this: Any local church, whether it's 50 or 50,000, whose leadership culture is not shaped by the same grace it says it believes, is unbiblical and heading for trouble. So I have said from the beginning, Mars Hill Church, Mark Driscoll deals with its sins, or it's done. I absolutely believe this. It's done, it's over. There is - you guys may not know this - there's a firestorm coming that's worse than what you've been through.

Mike Cospers: We'll be right back.

 @JoshShank

Joshua Shank: My name is Joshua Shank from Youngstown Metro Church.

Mike Cosper: This audio is from the 2010 annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Joshua Shank: And this motion is simply to express appreciation and affirmation of the investment of the Acts 29 Network in helping Southern Baptists to plant and multiply gospel-centered Great Commission churches. And I'm going to make this motion in the form of a rhyme: It's about time to drop all that malign on A29. Let's rewind and give a little affirmation on what Big Papa D, Scotty T, and Cru are doing to reach the nations. It ain't a bunch of kids cuttin' loose, sipping on gin and juice. They got roots. And if you ask them, they'll hang out with your suits. It's about applying texts to context. You fathers taught us that. Don't be tripping. They just hittin' on the mission where they at. All I want to say is teamwork will make the dream work. Thank you.

Mike Cosper: In case you missed it, there were shout outs in there to Big Papa D - that being Driscoll - and Scotty T - Scott Thomas, the executive director of Acts 29. Now, aside from the general entertainment value of rapping pastors, that clip provides an interesting window into what was happening inside the SBC and in evangelicalism more broadly, around Driscoll, Mars Hill and Acts 29.

By then Mars Hill was 14 years old, well into its multi-site journey, and helping to plant and multiply dozens of churches each year through Acts 29. Acts 29 has no denominational affiliation, but they welcomed churches that did so long as they shared theological convictions. And this was attractive for lots of SBC church planters, where the convention provided a network for funding and a connection for international missions. Acts 29 provided a network for relationships, coaching, and strategy. If you think of the SBC like your dad or your uncle paying your way through school, Acts 29 was your fraternity. There was support, a shared philosophy of ministry, and shared particulars around reform theology. And there was also a whole lot of fun.

All of that might have been relatively uncontroversial if it hadn't been for the connection with Mark. For many, their introduction to him came through Donald Miller's 2003 book, *Blue Like Jazz*, a memoir that in many ways captured the religious spirit of Gen Xers at the turn of the century. Driscoll appeared only a few times in the book, but he appeared as Mark the cussing pastor, and that moniker and reputation would dog him for years to come.

There's kind of this legend that his early sermons were littered with swearing, which is just untrue. In all of my research and interviews, I've only come across one or two instances where he actually swore in the pulpit, one of which he sincerely and publicly apologized for later. But there's more than one way to be offensive with words. There were crude jokes, harsh comments about the LGBTQ community, and comments about women that could be misogynistic or objectifying. There was also his teaching on sex and sexuality that could be downright graphic. He'd warn the church not to let younger kids listen, and then sermons on Proverbs or Song of Solomon especially, would get pretty detailed about sex, sexual appetites, and even techniques.

Some of this would make its way online. I remember a particularly graphic tweet from the official Mars Hill Church account about the length of time it could take a woman to

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climax. All of this led to a great deal of suspicion and concern about Mark in more established evangelical circles. Add to that, the fact that Mars Hill and Acts 29 taught Christian Liberty around alcohol, and it led to a special kind of hostility inside the SBC.

So there was constant dialogue on blogs, Baptist newspapers, and elsewhere, about whether or not it was good for the convention to partner with Acts 29 or platform Driscoll. For instance, in 2009, when Southeastern Baptist Seminary hosted Driscoll for a conference, it created a significant uproar in the convention, which likely contributed to Joshua Shanks floor motion that you just heard.

It wasn't just Baptists that were critical of Mark though. John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church, president of Master's Seminary and author of dozens of books and commentaries, constantly criticized Driscoll. Some of it was theological, but most of it was about Driscoll's vulgar style in the pulpit.

In an article titled "Grunge Christianity" from 2006, MacArthur wrote, "I don't know what Driscoll's language is like in private conversation, but I listened to several of his sermons. To be fair, he didn't use the sort of four-letter expletives that most people think of as cuss words. Nothing that might get bleeped on broadcast television these days. Still, it would certainly be accurate to describe both his vocabulary and his subject matter at times as tasteless, indecent crude, and utterly inappropriate for a minister of Christ. In every message I listened to, at least once he veered into territory that ought to be clearly marked off limits for the pulpit."

10 years later in 2016, MacArthur was sitting on a panel of pastors at a conference and was asked what to make of the ascendent support for Donald Trump among evangelicals. MacArthur had a clear idea of where to point the finger.

 @JohnMacArthur

John MacArthur: You guys have probably read, there's some interesting articles in the last couple of days on the relationship between Mark Driscoll and Donald Trump. Have you seen those? Yeah. And that the evangelical interest in Donald Trump and his crassness and rudeness and brashness and profanity, the way has been prepared by Mark Driscoll for that among evangelicals.

One of these articles talked about, remember the moral majority, when moral meant something, and now we have a guy running for president being advocated by Christian university presidents and pastors, who is a public adulterer.

Mike Cospser: It's worth noting that MacArthur later changed his tune, but not about Driscoll, about Trump. He became an avid Trump supporter as did others on that panel in 2020. But that's probably a story for another podcast. For now, it's sufficient to say that MacArthur was hardly alone in raising these early concerns about Mark. And they didn't just come from conservative circles.

 @JonesTony

Tony Jones: I was in the blogosphere for 10 years.

Mike Cospser: That's Tony Jones. Tony was one of the founders of the emergent church movement and had been connected with Mark in the nineties. They diverged over theol-

ogy, a story we'll get into in another episode. And in the years that followed, Tony was a chronicler of what was happening in the church, both inside emergent and beyond.

Tony Jones: I knew for a fact that my numbers shot through the roof whenever I blogged about Rob Bell or Mark Driscoll. A lot of people forget, like, that's how Rachel Held Evans became famous, blogging about Mark Driscoll.

Mike Cospers: That's probably overstating the case a bit. Rachel's criticism of conservative Christianity, particularly around biblical womanhood, drew attention on its own. But yes, she was also one of Mars Hill's foremost critics. Where most of the criticism that came from inside the church was around leadership style, tactics and personality, Rachel's critiques focused on issues like toxic masculinity, objectification of women, and the treatment of LGBTQ people. In this, she was kind of the foremost voice in a chorus of critiques that saw the problem, not just in the style of Mars Hill, but the substance too. And those critiques continue to this day. Rachel tragically passed away about two years ago from medical complications after an infection. Another source of that criticism came from us at Christianity Today.

Kate Shellnut: I will say that he is the first person that I know of that blocked me on Twitter, and I'm still blocked.

Mike Cospers: That's Kate Shellnut, Senior News Editor here at CT.

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 @KateShellnut

Kate Shellnut: And I think that happened pretty early on in Her.meneutics times, so probably 2013. We were writing about him on Her.meneutics. It would have been that. So Her.meneutics was CT's women's blog and we posted every single day. And so that was back when it was early-ish in the Twitter sphere, but when blogs were where all this went down. You know from all these stories that the blogs are a character themselves and the story of Mars Hill. And so we had kind of a side role in all of that, I think, in platforming evangelical women because a lot of them were either naming him explicitly or talking about the same phenomenon that he represented about gender, about sex, about marriage, about celebrity culture, about church structure, all of this, that I think he didn't like being the enemy in so many of those stories that I was editing and pushing out there. So it wasn't my direct reporting, but it was the content that CT was sharing at the time. I also ran all of our social media back then, so I would have been tweeting and tagging at Pastor Mark in any case.

Mike Cospers: It would be impossible to fully account for the other voices, especially the bloggers who contributed to a mounting wave of criticism that flooded the church. Warren Throckmorton, who you'll hear from later in the series, was probably the foremost as he became an outlet for Mars Hill insiders to leak internal documents, letters, and news. But it was a flood and it grew steadily louder and more mainstream as the years went on.

You can't talk about who killed Mars Hill without considering the role the blogs played. Kate, put it perfectly: They're kind of a character in and of themselves.

I want to pull back for a moment and look at the bigger picture here because the Mars Hill's story doesn't happen in a vacuum. For me, there's actually a personal element to

this story. In the year 2000, I helped co-found a church called Sojourn in Louisville, Kentucky, and I served on that staff for 15 years.

Our story in many ways ran parallel to Mars Hill's. We had a similar approach to mission, contextualization, edgy music, edgy aesthetics. We experienced dramatic growth and we spun out multi-site locations. We were part of Acts 29 from about 2003 to 2010, and then launched our own church planting network. But also like Mars Hill, we slowly but steadily experienced brewing inner conflict and division. I was primarily the pastor of worship and arts, but I also served on our executive team, which meant that I was part of and sometimes responsible for negotiating tension and conflict in the church. We started losing key leaders and others started burning out right and left. By 2015, I was exhausted from it all, and my mentors told me it was time to get out, so I resigned. A year later, our lead pastor was put on leave to deal with issues related to that unhealthy culture and poor leadership. And six months after that, he took responsibility for that culture and leadership, and resigned. But relationships were severed that have never recovered, and the wounds still haunt people in our community to this day.

There are other connections too. Darrin Patrick, former pastor of the Journey in St. Louis and later at Seacoast in Charleston, was a really good friend. I watched as his ministry imploded in 2016, and then as he made efforts to understand how and why, made efforts to reconcile where he could, and rebuild his ministry. And then I felt the devastation last year when he took his own life.

And then there's Mars Hill itself. While we were in Acts 29, I made a lot of friends at the church, including many of the folks you'll hear on this podcast. And I met Mark several times during those years. He was always kind and generous to me. Mars Hill and Mark had a deep impact on me and the ministry that I helped lead. So like many in this story, the fall of Mars Hill broke my heart. The sad truth is I'm sure there are plenty of other names that come to mind when this topic comes up. Bill Hybels, Perry Noble, Tullian Tchividjian, Ravi Zacharias, Ted Haggard, Carl Lenz, James MacDonald. And those are celebrity names, but this is far from just a celebrity problem. I know of at least a dozen more pastors of small to mid-sized churches who were removed from leadership for reasons that echo the ones cited by Tim Smith at the beginning of this episode. It seems like it's an epidemic.

Here's Ed Stetzer again:

Ed Stetzer: I have a little flyer that I keep from the year I spoke at a conference at Saddleback. There's seven of us speaking at their big global conference that year, and Mark was one of the seven, and I was one of the seven, and Rick Warren was one of seven. But the way the flyer is printed out, it actually has Rick Warren on the left side and I'm on the right side, and in the middle, there were five other speakers. And of those five other speakers, three of them ended up leaving the ministry for some reason. Mark, and no reason to list the other two, this is about Mars Hill. But some came back. Matter of fact, one didn't. And I could name...There were others who were at that conference, who spoke at that conference, who weren't on the main stage. And what I would say is there's a body count of young pastors whose ability rose them to prominence before their character was ready for it. You know, Mark was and is a remarkably gifted person. And

in some ways, Mark was the first internet age megachurch celebrity pastor, and leading number one podcasts, number one sermon downloads, those kinds of things.

And so what that did is it elevated Mark to the stratosphere so quickly, whereas, you think you might be a pastor of a megachurch, and I know some people just think the megachurch is bad in general, but I know a lot of godly megachurch pastors, and I know a lot of megachurch pastors who I'm like, Ooh, we got to...There are challenges that they're walking through and maybe bringing other people through.

But typically, if someone would start a church and it might take 20, 30 years of faithful ministry, but the internet just propelled things with such rapidity and the internet only sees how you speak. That's all the internet is, it's all about verbal articulation, so it doesn't say what's your leadership structure, it doesn't have an accountability in the local church, it doesn't have how are we living life on life? And so I think what we've seen since Mars Hill is that there have been other who have been elevated very, very quickly again, where they're elevated by their ability before their character was ready.

Mike Cospers: And that raises one more question about who killed Mars Hill. If this is so widespread, if it just keeps happening, if it's not just about Mars Hill or just about Mark, or for that matter, James MacDonald or Perry Noble, or Bill Hybels, isn't there a bigger cultural issue at work? If it just keeps happening, isn't there something broader to look at like ourselves? When we ask why this happens, shouldn't we ask why we keep doing it? Why we seem to like charismatic figures, whose character doesn't align with their gifts, giving them platforms and adulation?

Diane Langberg is a psychologist whose work has focused on the experiences of trauma, abuse and PTSD. She's cared for veterans, survivors of sexual abuse, and refugees of war. She also has a unique expertise on clergy, survivors of clergy abuse, and the toxic systems inside churches and institutions that enable them.

 @DianeLangberg

Diane Langberg: I think in our country, we, as Christians, have ceased to think that the most important thing that we do is be like Christ who serves the least of these. That's not what we've been doing. We've been garnering fame and numbers and money and alignment with secular power that makes us look good, and baptizing the whole darn thing. And I think that's been going on most of my lifetime, and I'm 72. And it's become more and more obvious, I think, and clear. And it's ugly and it's divisive and it's really not about Christ at all. And it breaks God's heart.

Mike Cospers: So back to 2014. In Mark's telling of the story, he was ready to enter the process. The audio you're about to hear is from an interview that Mark and Grace gave to Brian Houston, lead pastor of Hillsong in Australia. As Mark recounts it, he'd met with the board on October 10th and 11th, and agreed to start a restoration process. But then, on Monday, October the 12th, he had an experience hearing God's voice that would change his mind.

Mark Driscoll: I was in the bedroom, Grace was in the living room, and he spoke to me and he spoke to her in a supernatural way that neither of us anticipated or expected. And so Grace walked in and she said, I feel like the Lord just spoke to me and said what

we're supposed to do. And I said, I feel like the Lord just spoke to me and said what we're supposed to do. It's not what we wanted, it's not what we had agreed to, it's not what we had planned for. And so I asked her, Well, what did the Lord say to you, because I didn't want to influence her. And she said we're...

Grace Driscoll: We're released. From Mars Hill.

Mark Driscoll: She said, Well, what did he say to you? And I said the Lord revealed to me that a trap has been set, there's no way for us to return to leadership. And I didn't know what that meant or what was going on at the time. And I said, he said we're released too, we need to resign.

Mike Cospers: Now, if you listen closely, you heard a really key phrase, one that set the tone for the diverging stories about Mars Hill that continue to this day. Mark didn't just say, We're released. He said, A trap has been set. Aaron Gray was the campus pastor at Mars Hill Shoreline, and part of the team investigating the charges against Mark.

 @AaronCGray

Aaron Gray: To this day, I have no idea what that means. It was really disappointing to hear the kind of pulling the God told me card, especially around something as specific about there's some trap laid for him.

Mike Cospers: In the years since, that's essentially been Mark's story. In that interview with Brian Houston, he did emphasize his personal responsibility. But in a lot of other appearances, the question of character really doesn't come up. Instead, there are references to a conflict around leadership issues. For example, here he is at a conference called men coaching men in September 25th.

40 MIN

Mark Driscoll: 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 year. And it reached the point where God released my wife and I from that ministry. And up until that point, it really got nuts

Mike Cospers: And here's another example, from a TV show called Life Today from April, 2017:

Mark Driscoll: We had a governance war at the church that went eight years behind the scenes over who's in charge and how things play out. And so at the end we had 67 elders in 15 locations in five states, a large percentage of whom I had never met, and they wanted to have independent local churches, and we were one large church in many locations. So there was an eight year battle that finally went public the last year, and was very painful for everyone involved, especially the wonderful, dear, generous, amazing people that served and gave and made it all happen. And so the governing board in authority over me invited us to continue and we prayed about it and talked about it as a family and felt like we heard from the Lord, and I resigned.

Mike Cospers: Mark wasn't just telling that story to outsiders. In the summer of 2015, Tim Smith reached out to him to reconnect. And as I said earlier, Tim was a 16-year veteran at Mars Hill. You'll hear a lot of his story in a later episode. At times, he and Mark had

been very close. In fact, in the early days, Tim and his wife, Beth, lived in Mark and Grace's basement for awhile. So Tim felt loyalty to Mark and a desire to reconcile. So they met in June at a Panera Bread.

Tim Smith: And I confessed to him that I really felt like I wasn't a very good friend to him at times, that sometimes out of loyalty I pulled too many punches, and I didn't share with him some of the things that I thought, that I kind of chose peace over honesty at some points, and I regretted that. And I really cared for him, and I wish that I would have been a better friend to him. I think he was appreciative of that, but he said there wasn't really anything to forgive, but that he knows what I really did, and he'd forgiven me for that a long time ago. And that was confusing, so I was like, Well what. And without going into all the details, he basically just shared with me that he had come to believe that towards the end of the investigation process, what he'd come to believe is that myself, along with a couple of the other guys in the board of elders, long-running pastors of the church, were planning to release all the details of the investigation to the media as a way to push Mark out and take over the church for ourselves. And that I broke his heart, but he forgave me for it.

Mike Cosper: Dave Bruskas was one of the executive elders at the time. He had a front row seat to the investigation and all the discussions that were going on inside the board.

Dave Bruskas: I've heard the narratives in the public that those men, the board of elders, somehow, some way had an underlying motive to take the church away from Mark, to arrange the evidence in such a way and then respond to the overseers who ultimately made the decision regarding Mark's future, controlled it, led it in a way that there was no other option for Mark to step away, and because they wanted to take the church from him. And I just want to be on record of saying, I think that's absolutely false. Every single one of those men wanted to see, without exception, Mark restored to ministry. We weren't going to fire him. And by him resigning further processes, they were canceled, they were circumvented. They were derailed by his resignation. And so he's out and now we have to decide what to do next. And my perspective, my attention, as did most of the lead pastors, shifted to, What am I going to do with this church? And it was a two or three hour meeting is all it took to come to the grim reality that Mars Hill was done.

Mike Cosper: So who killed Mars Hill? Will you have to assign some of the blame to the guy at the center of it, the guy whose temperament created so much conflict and pain and disunity. But we're not just talking about the collapse of an individual's ministry; we're talking about the end of Mars Hill itself. And we should never lose sight of this as a place where people experienced radical transformation, recovery from addiction, restored marriages, a place where life's landmarks took place, marriage, birth of children, the burial of loved ones. How does that go away, almost overnight? Yes, we look to Mark, and we'll look at that more as we go, but shouldn't we also look at the people around him, the ones who defended and insulated him, who built the ministry almost entirely on one person's back? What about the insiders who, after leaving, worked with a vengeance to bring Mark down? What about the outside voices, the criticism that came from people who thought Mars Hill was either way too liberal or way too conservative? Or the perpetual pot stirring on social media. Those, like Tony Jones noted, that discovered what great clickbait Mars Hill was.

 @DaveBruskas

45 MIN

And then what about us? As I said already, this is hardly an isolated phenomenon. Why do we keep doing this? Why are we regularly platforming people whose charisma outpaces their character and who leave devastation in their way? Something attracts us. We buy in, and then we watch the collapse like spectators at a demolition derby.

Understanding why this happens is really the project for this whole podcast. I think as we pick up this particular story, turn it over in our hands and examine it from every angle, we'll learn a lot about Mars Hill, but also about these bigger questions, about what's happening in the church worldwide. But for now, I'll say this: If we're going to honestly ask who killed Mars Hill, I think we'll find that the answer was a little bit like the ending of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*. Maybe we all did it.

Mike Cospers: We've reached out to Mark Driscoll for comment on this podcast and we'll continue to. So far, we haven't had a response, but I really hope to talk to him before the season is done.

On our next episode, we're backing the clock up all the way to the 1990s, to the days of Saddleback Sam and seeker-sensitive mega churches. There we'll find the origins of Mars Hill as both in reaction to, and continuation of, that movement. We'll remember a time when words like postmodern, missional, and emergent were big buzzwords, and we'll see a young Mark Driscoll finding his way towards a vision for a different kind of church.

The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill is a production of Christianity Today. It's executive produced by Eric Petrik. It's produced, written and edited by Mike Cospers. Our associate producer is Joy Beth Smith. Music, sound design, and mixing by Kate Siefker. Our theme song is *Sticks and Stones* by Kings Kaleidoscope. The closing song this week, *The Slow and Steady Wins the Race* by Pedro the Lion. Our graphic designs by Brian Todd. Social media by Nicole Shanks. Editorial consulting by our online managing editor, Andrea Palpant Dilley. CT's editor in chief is Timothy Dalrymple. Thanks for listening and stay tuned for that conversation.