THE RISE & FALL OF MARS HILL

EPISODE 15

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53 MIN

BONUS EPISODE

Everything Is Still Falling Apart

SHOW NOTES

Building an institution on celebrity power, charisma, and a spirit of grandiosity attracts a lot of people, money and a certain kind of cachet for everyone involved. It helps them all to feel like they're part of something that's big—a movement providing a sense of meaning and purpose. But too often, these movements crumble, and those inside are crushed by the process.

It's a pattern that extends far beyond Mars Hill, into the realm of politics, academia, media, and more. In this bonus episode of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, host Mike Cosper speaks to Yuval Levin and Roger Berkowitz about the connections between the failure of our cultural institutions and the phenomena of rootlessness and loneliness, exploring how these related phenomena create the preconditions for charismatic leaders and corruption. He also talks to Russell Moore about what change looks like in the ruins, starting small, and the power of remembering our death.

MASTHEAD

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

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TRANSCRIPT

Joe Rogan: The problem with church is the problem with anybody that gets in any sort of a position of power. It's easy to abuse it.

Mike Cosper: This is Joe Rogan talking on his podcast with standup comic and actor, Bill Burr. Let me say up front, this clip gets pretty rough, though it is edited and censored quite a bit. Even at that, it's still pretty rough. But I think it's pretty insightful, an interesting glimpse into the perspective of outsiders on the world of celebrity pastors. You can jump ahead a few minutes if you want, to the credits.

Joe Rogan: So to have a guy who is a pastor that's not a creep, and that really cares, but isn't trying to buy a [CENSORED] Rolls Royce, like Joel Osteen, and live in a giant mansion. It's like it always goes...

Bill Burr: Megachurch?

Joe Rogan: Yeah. It always goes south. It's absolute power.

Bill Burr: You know what I love about Joel Osteen is he's an arena act.

Joe Rogan: Yeah. And he does Vegas too. He does the [CENSORED] T-Mobile Arena in Vegas.

Bill Burr: I want to see the show.

Joe Rogan: They have a giant [CENSORED] picture of him up there.

Bill Burr: You have to respect an arena act, I think.

Joe Rogan: I think there's something to that. Yeah, there's something to that. It's this girl that I was talking about, she was real lost, and I think she was Jewish, or maybe she converted to Judaism later, but anyway, for one point in time, she was going to this rock and roll church. She was like... She was a sweet kid. She was like, You should go, you would really like it. I'm like, I guarantee I wouldn't like it. I'm like, Wait, some young, hip guy, probably sings songs, probably tries to [CENSORED] women. Get outta here with that.

Bill Burr: Right. It's like a yoga class.

Joe Rogan: It always happens that way.

Bill Burr: It always does.

Joe Rogan: Those rock and roll alternative churches. There's a few. Like the Justin Bieber guy. You know the guy that Justin Bieber has?

Mike Cosper: Rogan's talking about Carl Lentz, who met Justin Bieber when he was in a moment of crisis and became his pastor and trusted friend. At the time this was recorded, in 2018, Lentz was the pastor of Hillsong Church's New York location. He was a flamboyant and charismatic character, taking the pastor celebrity thing to new heights. His

Instagram feed was full of photos of him and his wife hanging out with celebrities, hip hop stars, NBA players, and Kardashians. Typically he's wearing ultra expensive brands too, like Gucci or Supreme, and almost always wearing Louis Vuitton gold-framed glasses.

In just a second here, what doesn't quite translate to audio is that Rogan's producer is going to pull up a now-infamous photo of Lentz and Bieber. It's a paparazzi shot of the two of them walking. Lentz is shirtless and tan, and his shorts sit ridiculously low on his hips.

Joe Rogan: There's the preacher. Okay. Whoa, whoa, whoa. Yeah, [CENSORED]. Hold up. What's going on with his [CENSORED] shorts? Bro. No. No, no, no, no, no. Any guy who's showing [CENSORED], you're pulling your shorts down to [CENSORED] like that, you're doing that because you're trying to get laid. Stop. Pull your [CENSORED] shorts up to a normal height. Those things should be five inches higher. I know what you're doing. You probably don't even have underwear on, you [CENSORED] creep. Jesus does not want you dressing like that. No.

Mike Cosper: Turns out Rogan was right. A lot more was going on.

Brian Houston: If it's true that people have been treated badly or that people have been bullied, I am a hundred percent committed to moving that out of our church.

Mike Cosper: That's Brian Houston, the founding pastor of Hillsong. Hillsong is a global megachurch with locations around the world and 150,000 independents. This interview is from the Today show in May of 2021. Houston was sitting down with Savannah Guthrie to talk about mounting controversy at Hillsong - controversy about Carl Lentz.

Brian Houston: Look, Carl was Carl, he's a unique character. There's a lot of things I miss about Carl. But having said that, there were leadership issues that I believe included lying, included what I would call narcissistic behavior.

Mike Cosper: Six months earlier, it was revealed that Lentz was having an affair, and he was fired. Shortly after that, more stories emerged. Stories about intimidation, privileging the famous, taking advantage of church members to serve as house cleaners and chauffeurs. And then more stories about more affairs.

Brian Houston: I'm acknowledging that mistakes have been made and that there are things where we need to get far better, much better. I'm not shrinking back from that.

Mike Cosper: William Sapphire once called the phrase, mistakes were made, the artful dodge of the impersonal apology. It's passive voice. There's an admission that something went wrong, but there's no statement of responsibility. It's a favorite of politicians responding to allegations like the use of torture, politically-motivated firings, the misuse of campaign funds, or my favorite - spitefully instigating a traffic jam of biblical proportions in New Jersey.

Barack Obama: Some terrible mistakes were made.

George Bush: And he's right. Mistakes were made.

Bill Clinton: No one is blameless here. Mistakes were made here.

Chris Christie: Mistakes were clearly made.

5 MIN

Mike Cosper: Mars Hill used the phrase too. It was in an apology for plagiarism in December of 2013. It was actually their second apology, though. The first one did offer blame. It blamed a research assistant for deleting footnotes. But when that researcher's notes surfaced online with their footnotes intact, they released the second apology. Events in the following months revealed that the mistakes made at Mars Hill were far worse than they appeared that December. The same was true for Hillsong. Three months after his interview with Savannah Guthrie, in August of 2021, Houston was charged with covering up sexual abuse by his father. He took a leave of absence this past January, but shortly after, resigned. Allegations had emerged that he'd sent inappropriate texts to another woman, and that he'd entered the hotel room alone with another woman while intoxicated.

We opened the series asking why does this keep happening, where did the failures begin? And why does it seem like everyone - fellow pastors, older mentors, denominations, networks, and publishers - why are they all powerless to prevent these disasters?

Savannah Guthrie: Do you ever think about what Jesus would've felt like sitting in Hillsong church?

Brian Houston: Honest answer?

Savannah Guthrie: Yes.

Brian Houston: I think he would like it.

Mike Cosper: From Christianity Today, I'm Mike Cosper and you are listening to a bonus episode of the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. Today on our show, we'll look at this broader phenomenon - the way religious organizations like Mars Hill and Hillsong have this way of erupting, catching hold of people, and proving over time to have a hollowness that collapses. We've had decades of high profile pastoral failures. You'd think we'd have learned and reformed from these experiences, so why does it feel like everything is still falling apart?

An interesting place to start this conversation is with the federal government.

Yuval Levin: I actually got to the broader argument by thinking about some of our political institutions, and especially by thinking about Congress.

Mike Cosper: This is Yuval Levin. He's a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, and his writing and research explores conservatism generally, political philosophy, and social and cultural issues. In recent years, his research in writing has explored the failure of institutions across society, the role that failure has on character formation, and the way that fame has replaced virtue.

Yuval Levin: I came to think that what was really happening was a transformation of that

institution from a place people seek to come to in order to make laws and influence public policy, to a place that people come to in order to become prominent players in the theater of our culture war. Members increasingly thought about what they were up to in terms of how to build their following, how to build their personal brand. I came to realize that this was something that was happening in a lot of institutions. We had transformed our expectations of institutions, from expecting them to form people we could trust, to expecting them to display and elevate people as individuals on a platform. Once you see that in one place, you see it everywhere - the academy, the media, the professions. Over and over, you find that rather than be formative, these institutions became performative; rather than be molds, they became platforms.

Mike Cosper: One of the most straightforward examples of the way institutions form us is the military, where the body is broken down and rebuilt, the will is reoriented around the chain of command, and where a sense of absolute dedication to your brothers in arms readies you for the battlefield.

Something similar happens, or at least used to happen, in places like government or even the church. Entry into the institution most often required something like apprenticeship, learning from those in the years and generations ahead of you, starting from humble, often behind the scenes and functionary roles, as you grow in competency and demonstrate responsibility, moving into more and more significant roles of leadership. Because of that, we end up with certain assumptions about people according to the roles they play in society, their titles or vocations.

10 MIN

Yuval Levin: This may be easiest to see if we think about the professions. You sort of know it. There's such a thing as an accountant. I trust an accountant, not because he knows the tax laws better than I do, but ultimately because there are things an accountant would never do, and would never sign his name to. And so when he does do something, I trust it. You could say the same thing about a journalist, you could say the same thing about a pastor or a teacher. There are responsibilities that come with their institutional roles, and that's how they build trust.

And so I think part of what we lose when we lose that formative character of the institution, when the institution becomes just a place to perform, a stage, is we lose the capacity to have that trust, that sense that there are things this person wouldn't say or do because she's a scientist, or because he's a priest. It's just not gonna happen. When that is no longer available to us as a source of trust, this transformation of institutions really becomes a source of growing mistrust.

Mike Cosper: Are there pivot points that you would look at historically, like the turmoil of the 60s or Watergate, that eroded that institutional trust, that were catalytic for this?

Yuval Levin: Yeah, I certainly think that there's a way in which the fragmentation that our society has gone through since the middle of the 20th century has undermined that trust some. Whereas every voice in American life told everybody in the first half of the 20th century to become more like everyone else, since the 1960s, every voice in American life has told every American, be yourself. And be yourself is a liberating thing, but it does tend to break down mutual responsibility. And I think that that voice whispering

in our ear, be yourself, is one way to think about why people in power tend to see institutions as platforms for themselves. This has built up a tremendously powerful kind of celebrity culture, elevating particular individuals, and giving them a stage. Again, rather than channeling their ambition and their power in the service of other people or of broader causes.

Mike Cosper: It's so interesting because one of the things that we're demonstrating is the way that the rise of celebrity culture in the US also gave rise to this kind of dramatic transformation of the culture of churches. The way Bill Bishop puts it is like church became this phenomenon of getting to go to church with people who are just like us. So it is interesting the way that that sense of sort of personal self-expression completely transforms religious life for evangelicals in particular.

Yuval Levin: Yeah. I think that the lure of self expression is particularly challenging to our religious institutions, because they're not just a place to show the world who you are, they're a place to become a better person. But to understand our religious institutions fundamentally as expressive, I think robs us of the greatest service they can perform in our lives, which is to transform our souls in positive ways. And there really is a way in which the invasion of the logic and assumptions of celebrity culture make it very hard for us to think in terms of personal transformation, and instead lure us into thinking in terms of personal expression. And those are just very different things when it comes to religion.

Mike Cosper: Let's stick with the military as an example, because it's still functioning in this formative way. A person might join the Marines because they want to experience the honor that comes with the uniform, or the glory of battle, or a sense of duty to family or country. Or maybe it's just the fact that they want a vocation that can provide better opportunities for them. Regardless of that motivation, the experiences of bootcamp, training, deployment, and the battlefield, transform you into a fundamentally different kind of person than you were before.

Those who've been through that formation hold it to be something sacred. This plays out in interesting ways. One is a lifelong reverence most service men and women feel about their work or their branch of the military. But another is a deep contempt for someone who wants to borrow on the capital of appreciation our culture has for soldiers. People who want to wear the uniform in public but never served, or those who wear medals and ribbons they didn't earn. There's a name for it. It's called stolen valor.

"Navy SEAL" 1: What's your name?

Man: That's my team name. I was the Fixer, Johnny the Fixer.

"Navy SEAL" 2: It's a pleasure meeting you.

Man: Hey, guys.

Mike Cosper: If you go on YouTube and type in the phrase stolen valor, you'll find hundreds of clips like this, maybe thousands. In this case, it's two soldiers talking to a guy wearing a total of three Navy SEAL tridents and an oversized Punisher patch, a sym-

bol associated with SEAL team 3. In the video's introduction, the host points out that real SEALs would never dress like this. The two soldiers in the video talk to the guy for a while, giving him more and more rope to lie about his military service. Eventually though, they've had enough.

"Navy SEAL" 1: So where did you buy all your fake **?

Man: Fake **?

"Navy SEAL" 1: How are you getting this stuff? You're telling me a bunch of ** that doesn't make any sense.

Man: Really?

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"Navy SEAL" 1: Yeah. Take the stuff off the bag if you're not a real SEAL, now. Because I know you're not, you know you're not. You know how I know you're not? Because I'm a real SEAL. He's a real SEAL.

"Navy SEAL" 2: You're aware that stolen valor is actually a felony now?

"Navy SEAL" 1: It is.

Man: What do you want, my hat?

"Navy SEAL" 1: No, I want you to take off everything. I want you to quit acting like you're something that you're not.

Mike Cosper: In a weird way, this is actually an example of an institution working, gate-keeping itself from those who haven't been through its formative processes. One has to earn the right to wear the uniform or its medals. And that's not just a matter of pride, it's also essential for the institution to properly function. They have to have confidence that the person standing next to them is who they say they are, has the qualifications to wear the uniform, and to be counted on in a crisis. In other areas of life, though, being an institutional outsider is actually seen as a virtue, especially in politics. In 2008, that love for the outsider helped to fuel Barack Obama's presidential campaign.

Barack Obama: The American people, they understand the biggest gamble right now is to have the same old characters playing the same old Washington games over and over again, and somehow expecting a different result. That's a risk we cannot afford. That's a gamble we cannot take. We gotta turn the page and write a new chapter.

Mike Cosper: Funnily enough, his opponent, John McCain, ran on a similar message.

@SenJohnMcCain

John McCain: Let me just offer an advanced warning to the old big spending, do nothing, me first, country second crowd: Change is coming.

Mike Cosper: There's an extent to which that's a fair comment for both of them. Obama was essentially brand new to Washington and his biography represents the fulfillment

of the American dream. McCain, though he'd been in Washington for more than two decades, had always been willing to part ways with his party when he felt it was necessary. But claims to outsider and maverick status have dominated political narratives for decades, most recently including everyone from Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, to Donald Trump and Ted Cruz. Cruz may be one of the better examples of this actually. In spite of attending an Ivy League school and being married to a Goldman Sachs executive, he still claims outsider status in the culture and spends a lot of time criticizing so-called elites.

@tedcruz

Ted Cruz: This is the year of the outsider. I'm an outsider, Bernie Sanders is an outsider.

Mike Cosper: The appeal for this strategy, and the appeal for the audience as Levin describes it, is the sense that we get that an outsider is gonna tell us the truth.

Yuval Levin: One way to think about that is that you get at the truth by reaching for it as directly as possible. That layers of mediation, like the kind of hierarchy that you find in institutions, inevitably undermine authenticity and create opportunities for all kinds of corruption. This is a very familiar view, it's deeply ingrained in our culture, and so we have a tendency to think that the person who stands outside the system and says, I'm just me, I'm not this whole big institution, that's the person to trust. That outsider, that maverick is the truth teller. Again, often that's true. But at the same time, there's another way to think about authenticity, which has to do with layers of protection and formation that are necessary for us to actually have trust in people. Why would we trust the outsider, except that that person seems to be free of responsibility to others? Well, that's a strange reason to trust somebody. In fact, institutions can enable us to trust people by imposing responsibilities on them. By saying, what this person's role means is that he or she's held up to a standard.

Mike Cosper: The love of the outsider translates perfectly into the kind of entrepreneurial church planter and church leader that's shaped church leadership for three decades or more. There's not an expectation that a pastor should have formally studied the Bible in theology, or to have undergone any kind of apprenticeship in ministry, or even to have been examined and affirmed by a group of elders. The most important source of confidence in a leader today is simply results. And if the church is growing and innovating, a leader's outsider status and rejection of credentials becomes its own kind of virtue.

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Mark Driscoll: And so God called me to come back to Seattle. I was planked in on a megachurch food chain, doing college ministry for about a year, year and a half, and then I left to plant a church. And I'd never been to seminary or Bible college, I was not part of a denomination, I wasn't licensed or ordained. I'd actually never been a pastor of a church or a member in a church, so it seemed like a good idea to start my own, since I had this wealth of experience to draw from.

@PastorMark

Mike Cosper: Imagine going to see a doctor or an attorney and being told, Hey, I've never been to medical school, I have no certifications. I never interned with anybody, so I don't have any references to offer for my work. Now, you go ahead and lay down on that table, I'll go get my knife, and let's get that inflamed appendix out of you. That's pretty much exactly what's happening here. Actually, it's a little worse than that. Driscoll made these

comments while addressing a chapel service at a seminary. He's essentially saying that the very institution that paid for his flights and paid him a stipend to be there is superfluous. After all, he didn't need it.

Hillsong's rise to prominence is a very different story than Mars Hill's, but it illustrates the same results. Like Driscoll, institutions like denominations or seminaries didn't play any major role in their success or reputation. Instead, they made a direct connection to a massive audience through mass media. Unlike Mars Hill, though, that connection wasn't about Houston's charisma or person. Their ability to connect with an audience, the thing that helped them grow into a church with 80 campuses and 150,000 people, started with a 28-year-old former child star. She sang jingles for brands like Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Coca-Cola in Australia. In 1993, she wrote her first song for church. My guess is you've heard it. Her name was Darlene Zschech, and this coming Sunday, almost 30 years later, millions of Christians will gather in churches and sing "Shout to the Lord".

Music (Darlene Zschech): "Shout to the Lord, all the earth, let us sing...."

Mike Cosper: The song has been featured on more than 200 recordings, like American Idol.

Music (Darlene Zschech): "Power and majesty, praise to the King."

Mike Cosper: Randy Travis.

Music: (Randy Travis): "Mountains bow down and the seas will roar at the..."

Mike Cosper: Ruben Studdard.

Music: (Ruben Studdard): "...sound of your name."

Mike Cosper: Carmen. Yes, that Carmen.

Music: (Carmen): "I sing for joy at the work of your hand."

Mike Cosper: And countless others.

Music: "Forever I'll love you, forever I'll stand. Nothing compares to the ..."

Mike Cosper: More recently, you might have felt a little bit of nostalgia listening to the Grammy award-winning Christian album of the year. On the title song from Elevation and Maverick City Music's Old Church Basement, there's a bridge that remembers a line or two from several songs that were popular about 20 years ago. One of them is Shout to the Lord.

Music: "Shout to the Lord, all the earth, let us sing...."

Mike Cosper: In the three decades since "Shout To the Lord" became a phenomenon, Hillsong has released more than a hundred records. Quite a bit more than that if you

count kids' music, music in Spanish or Portuguese, or the almost 30 records from Hillsong Kiev alone. Their music provided a platform and credibility for leaders like Brian Houston and Carl Lentz, and not the other way around. But like Driscoll, once they gained a foothold on fame, they had the instincts and willingness to leverage it wider and wider.

I think a lot of Christians saw them as just an interesting evolution of what it meant to be a pastor, though, and they never stopped offering the kind of trust and social capital they'd offer any pastor. And the more I've thought about it, the investment of that trust is the source of the pain of spiritual abuse. We should see that as a different kind of stolen valor. We trust pastors because we think they're motivated by love and self-sacrifice. We hope there's someone who'll give you the kind of wisdom you want to hear when they're praying with you at your hospital bedside or at a parent's or loved one's graveside. Someone whose time and presence is full of grace, whether they're encountering the rich, the poor, or the dying.

A few years ago, I worked on a documentary that allowed me to meet a number of missionaries from around the world. I met men and women who regularly trudge through mosquito-infested rainforests and chest deep water to bring food and medicine to the people who dwell inside. I met someone who spent months being regularly poisoned when he came to visit a village. One missionary I met was on the field when he was diagnosed with a fatal brain tumor. Instead of coming home for his treatment and final days, where it would've been more comfortable and closer to family and friends, he went back to the field. Back to the neighbors he'd served, the pastors he'd mentored, and the city he'd prayed for. When I hear of pastors who use that title for selfish gain, for money or fame, or simply for the rush that comes with the power and control, I think of the phrase, stolen valor. They're borrowing on the capital of people who've given their lives away.

25 MIN

I think of them, and I see this guy in the video you heard earlier, with the goofy hat in the airport, a guy with a story that doesn't quite ring true, with a few too many pieces of flare on his hat or his backpack. They're not actually interested in earning respect through virtues like courage and self-sacrifice, but they want the social capital that comes with the badge, and the free drinks at the airport bar.

For several decades now, in the interest of church growth, our Christian institutions have been dramatically transformed, making way for entrepreneurial leaders, getting rid of anything that slows them down. These days, I've come around to thinking that we've under-appreciated the value of obstacles.

GK Chesterton has a famous parable about two people encountering a fence that blocks a roadway. The first one simply sees it as an obstacle in the way of progress, and orders it taken down. The second orders everyone to stop until someone can figure out why the fence was built in the first place. Maybe in this moment where things continually seem to go from bad to worse, we should consider what fences we've torn down and why. Maybe those fences helped temper our worst impulses, and maybe they helped us understand what mattered. Maybe they kept wolves out of the pen. Wolves who would prey on people, who took it for granted that there were just some things a pastor would never do. We'll be right back.

Yuval Levin said that once you see this phenomenon - people using institutions as platforms for celebrity - you see it everywhere, and I think that's true. But it raises an important question. What is it about us, our culture as a whole, that's eager to follow celebrity leaders, whether it's in religion or politics or the other spaces where this is happening? What are the preconditions that make us susceptible to those kinds of leaders? What inspires such radical devotion?

To answer that, I wanna visit some ideas from the work of Hannah Arendt. Arendt was a young Jewish academic getting her PhD in philosophy, when the Nazis came to power in 1933. She escaped Germany to France, only to be rounded up for deportation to a concentration camp in 1940. She escaped that as well, barely, and made her way to America, where she spent the rest of her life trying to understand what had happened; how had institutions and moral frameworks and basic decency collapsed so spectacularly. For the next 35 years, she wrote about the dynamics of movements, mobs, mass culture, the problem of evil, and all forms of tyranny. Reading her now, almost 50 years after she died, feels pressioned. She saw indicators in our culture that make sense of a variety of shifts, everything from the rise of authoritarianism and celebrity culture, to the phenomenon of social media and the way ordinary life becomes performative.

For Arendt, the horrors of the first half of the 20th century were an outburst of deeper undercurrents that remained after the war. One of the most significant of those was loneliness.

Roger Berkowitz: So many people in America have nobody, have no one. They are utterly alone, and they've lost the family, the faith, the religious, the work, all the structures that gave people a sense of being part of something.

Mike Cosper: This is Roger Berkowitz. He's the founder and academic director of the Hannah Arendt Center, and Professor of Political Studies, Philosophy and Human Rights at Bard College.

Roger Berkowitz: I think it's almost 30% of Americans now say they don't have one friend outside of a family, and even sometimes in a family, who they trust with their secrets or talk to on an intimate level. All of this is part of what Arendt calls mass loneliness or modern loneliness. People have always been lonely, right? Lonely is an old idea. But loneliness was generally confined to the periphery of life, but our general lives were not consumed by loneliness. And Arendt - and this is part of her work that I think is really rich - she argues that with the rise of industrialization, with the breakdown of tradition and religion and the increasing loss of a sense of place in the world, people are lonely in this kind of existential level. And these kind of lonely people are the kind of people who are ready to be mobilized by a mass movement.

Mike Cosper: Along with the idea of rootlessness and loneliness, there's this sense of restlessness. In the West today, we enjoy more leisure time than almost any other culture in world history, and we have more in terms of access to art and literature or mindless entertainment to keep us occupied. And yet our society has this kind of simmering dissatisfaction.

30 MIN

Roger Berkowitz: Nietzsche has an interesting take on some of this because what we're really talking about is decadence, right? Arendt's talking about loneliness, rootlessness. She doesn't use this word, but Nietzsche uses the word decadence. What decadence means, it's a question of style, and it means that life no longer dwells in the whole. And in that kind of decadence, there's a real sense of purposelessness, there's a sense of life has no meaning.

Mike Cosper: So then you have people who are deeply lonely, deeply dissatisfied and longing for meaning, and into their lives comes a charismatic leader who has a clear sense of what's wrong with the world, a clear vision for how to fix it, and a place for you in their story.

Roger Berkowitz: What the leader really has to do more than anything else is articulate a purpose. What is it that the movement is about? And if you articulate that purpose, Arendt says, there's a great quote, and what she says is, The skill of the totalitarian leader is the ability immediately to dissolve every statement of fact into a declaration of purpose. So what the leader does is whatever happens, they turn it around and show that it fits with, or is it opposed to, their purpose, and they become truth tellers. They reveal the hidden truths that no one else is willing to say, and that polite society refuses to utter. And they show that everything is really either in line with this purpose or trying to prevent or obfuscate this purpose. And it does strike me that kind of leadership is what is somewhat at issue here.

Mike Cosper: When I had this conversation a few months back, I remember this part sticking out to me so clearly, because what he describes here as an authoritarian leader was exactly the sort of thing you saw at Mars Hill. Mars Hill prided itself on this. Driscoll was enshrined as a truth teller, saying the kinds of things that were too polite to say in the outside world. This is hardly exclusive to Driscoll, though. This kind of countercultural truth telling shows up in many contexts where there's a charismatic leader at the helm. For Driscoll, the themes were about masculinity in the culture of the church, and he's far from the only one to emphasize these. But others have emphasized entrepreneurial leadership or certain messages about the family, or a condescending posture about getting the gospel or the church right.

Similarly, many spiritually abusive leaders share this tendency to spin every obstacle or inconvenient fact as an attack of the devil, or from unbelievers that want to hinder the church's mission. Mars Hill's plagiarism scandal has always stuck out to me in this respect. It's a simple objective fact that plagiarism existed in these books, and it was proven that Driscoll, or someone other than his research assistant, had deleted footnotes that would've avoided the scandal. Being generous, you could attribute it all to foolishness or a mistake, and not malice. But even then, to hear the church's internal conversations about this scandal, it was framed as attacks by the enemy, out to hinder the church's mission. In other words, in a system like this, there's an explanation for everything: Outside criticism, internal strife, even the misbehavior of the leader. And it turns out that it's not that hard to sell people on these explanations either, because they haven't simply bought into a cult of personality. It's about a sense of mission and meaning, and that is what overrides their better judgment.

Roger Berkowitz: I think one of the fundamental truths of humanity is life is about suffering, and what humans have shown over and over again is that they can take on immense sufferings, they can survive immense suffering, as long as they believe that it's for a purpose, that there's a reason for it. And to come back to the point about loneliness, we are living in a time in which loneliness also means purposelessness. Loneliness means that we live and we suffer, and we have no belief anymore that there's a reason for our suffering.

35 MIN

Mike Cosper: Again, I see this dynamic all through the Mars Hill story. Driscoll gave church members more than a community and more than a sense of God's grace and presence. More even than a concern for evangelism. He was offering an all-encompassing and very specific vision of what the good life, the Christian life should look like. And by following him, pursuing that vision, members would find fulfillment in their identities as men and women. They'd find meaning in their work, and they'd have worthy goals to pursue in the world. The ends in mind were grandiose. They were gonna change Seattle. In fact, they were going to change the world. The stories you heard on this podcast, again and again, were people who devoted themselves to that purpose, that sacrificed untold physical, emotional, and spiritual energy, trying to make it a reality. Most of them weren't blindly loyal to Driscoll, and they weren't unaware of his faults, but they were fully committed to this movement that he was leading.

In the aftermath, the members of Mars Hill have had to reckon with that commitment, both what it meant at the time and what it means now. It's incredibly complicated, and it often left those closest to the center with feelings of disillusionment. Stuff that in many ways takes a lifetime to sort out. I actually think Nate Burke got at this most clearly with a quote that elicited more feedback from our audience than any other.

@jnathanburke

Nate Burke: The thing that I'll say sometimes is it feels like there's a Confederate uniform in my attic, and I can unpack that for a ways. When I think about it, it's like to some degree I didn't get rid of the uniform. I didn't throw it away, because it's true, it happened. I wouldn't say that I'm proud of it because I didn't feature it in the living room either, but it's not something I'm ready to talk to everybody about. It sort of depends on what their perspective is. And I would say, what's really interesting to me thinking about this and talking to Jesse recently about it too, is I was really good at it.

There was that Ken Burns Vietnam series. If you ever saw that. There's this special forces guy that was in Vietnam pretty early on, and he's an old guy now, and he's interviewed and he says, It's really weird or strange being at your best, doing something that was so bad. And some part of me feels that, where it's like Oh, I was really good at that, but at the end of the day, I don't think it was helping anybody. It turned out I was in the wrong side of the war. And by the time I got out, and certainly after, it felt like we needed to lose, we deserved to lose. And it was a relief when we did.

Mike Cosper: One of the complicating factors in all of this is simply that these things work. Building a church on celebrity power, on charisma, on the sense of movement, on a spirit of grandiosity. It works. It attracts a lot of people, attracts a lot of money, attracts a certain kind of cache for everyone involved. For the leadership at the center, and for the members, to feel like they're part of something that's big, that's significant, that's mean-

ingful. But I think stories like Mars Hill and stories like Hillsong and so many others, prove time and again that there's an inherent instability to communities that are built this way, and that if we don't challenge some of these underlying assumptions, if we keep just building things the same way, we're going to continue to see things fall apart.

Here's Roger Berkowitz again.

Roger Berkowitz: I'm not a religious person and I'm not a Christian, but I understand churches and understand institutions. Even an institution like the church is at this point so atomistic, has so fully lost its sense of coherence, that it is subject to disintegration, and in a way that's a big part of the story you're telling.

Mike Cosper: There's one other aspect of this conversation that needs to be explored. And again, it starts with ourselves. We need to ask, what do we expect institutions to do, what are they built to do, and when are we using the wrong tool. We'll be back after this.

Russell Moore has had a front row seat to conflict and corruption inside of Christian institutions for the last number of years. He's written about it extensively here at CT, where he's the chair of theology and the director of the Berry. We sat down to talk about it, and in short order, we were talking about Wendell Berry.

@drmoore

Russell Moore: The problem is, I think, Wendell Berry used to say, talking about environmental issues: People want a solution as large scale as the problem, and that's rarely the case. Instead, what usually is the case are a bunch of small solutions. And he said those small solutions don't satisfy people's need for drama, and it doesn't feel like something's being fixed right away. And I think that's a huge problem with institutional recovery right now. Lots of small solutions are needed in a time when small solutions are seen as inadequate.

40 MIN

Mike Cosper: It's funny you mentioned Berry. I think he's got an essay called Damage, where he tells the story of digging a pond into a hillside so he can pasture cattle on there, and it's something he couldn't have done without a bulldozer, but within a season, the whole hillside collapses, trees fall into it, and not only can he not pasture there, he really can't do anything there because of how much damage he did to the hillside. And his metaphor is, having so much power without wisdom creates these kinds of circumstances.

Russell Moore: It's key also how Barry defines wisdom, which is not mere knowledge, but knowledge balanced with ignorance, and having this sense of the mystery of the way that the land works. And I think there's a clear parallel in terms of the mystery of how human beings work and how institutions work. The problem is, I think we always tend to overreact to the last bad thing. We have to react to the last bad thing. In the Damage essay that you mentioned from Berry, he says something like, To neglect the scar is to renew the wound. And that's certainly true, where there's a sense of, that's over with, let's stop thinking about it and move forward. And you'll see that in a lot of institutions that are trying to recover. Which is to say, we need to move on, so let's not keep looking backward and they end up repeating the same things. But maybe even more often is the sense of, that was terrible, and so the answer to that must be the op-

posite, whatever the opposite is, in the way that we're defining it, and you end up with another set of problems.

But the kind of wisdom that Berry's talking about is one that starts with, I don't know what to do. And when you're at a time when institutions are broken anyway, which means that everyone has to appeal to some mass, some populist mass, and you have to appeal to the people who have the most energy in the room at the moment, you often are going to end up with people who have solutions that are destructive.

Mike Cosper: Yeah, another thing Berry says is basically, It's a lost cause, right? Like in his lifetime, eventually the earth will take care of this, but the hillside itself is a lost cause, I'm not gonna be able to fix it in my lifetime. And I keep coming back to this idea that one of the ways we're screwing this up is that we're trying to fix the problems with the same kinds of impulses that created them. Right?

Russell Moore: Yeah.

Mike Cosper: So these grandiose ideas of how we're gonna fix the church and the church is gonna be great and all of this kind of stuff, it gave birth to the sort of nitro-injected church growth movements that we've had, which have brought a lot of people to Jesus and have done a lot of things to tarnish the witness of the church. And to learn from the lesson is to be just as skeptical of the grandiose solutions about how we're gonna fix it.

Russell Moore: Yes.

Mike Cosper: And I think that's hard, right? Because we want to weep for all the damage done, but the solutions are probably gonna be really small and personal, and local and generational, even.

Russell Moore: And gradually unfolding. One of the aspects of scripture that I find myself drawn back to constantly these days is the pillar of fire in leading the children of Israel out of Egypt. Which then this cloud of glory inhabits the tabernacle, so the people know when to move forward. When the cloud is there, we move. But there's not a predictable rhythm to that, there's a sense of powerlessness in front of it.

45 MIN

And I'm in a lot of meetings where we're talking about what's happening in the church and how to solve these problems. And sometimes we'll get to the end of one of these meetings and someone will say, Well, we've talked about what all the problems are, but when we get to the solutions, we don't have them. And what I often want to say is, maybe that is the solution, or maybe that's at least the first step of the solution. Peter has to go under the water and cry out, Lord, save me, before he is pulled up. There's a transitional time in everybody's life and I think there's a transitional time in institutional life, where we start to recognize, I can't control this technologically and I can't control this sociologically, but I'm also not ready to cynically walk away altogether. And again, that doesn't look like success because success looks like, here is the plan that we have for this curriculum to...Even when we're talking about long-term plans, people will often say, here's the way that we ensure that people who are children right now aren't going to grow up to be corrupt institutional leaders, but it's this series of steps. I just don't think

that's what God's doing.

Mike Cosper: John Witvliet has this great thing where he says, you know, the whole purpose of the gathering of the church is to prepare people for their encounters with death. And I think about that constantly in terms of how everything we do with our church gatherings runs in the opposite direction. It's all in the direction of triumphalism, it's all in a direction of how great life can be if we'd get our act together or follow this leader. That was all... Mark's whole thing was how wonderful temporal life would be with your marriage and your job and your money and your church. And I just wonder - I don't know, I wonder what role that has to play, the whole memento mori thing, has to play in the sort of journey of the church, if it's going to be a healthier place.

Russell Moore: Yeah, I've been struck for 15 years or so now with the loss of church graveyards. And those graveyards, I think, played a key role in the community remembering the communion of the saints, of course, but also the community being reminded of death every Sunday as they're going in, in a way that can change the way that one worships, and then the way that worship changes a person.

Mike Cosper: It's hilarious to me to think how much we talked about the dangers of modernity, 20 years ago, and how it had malformed Christians and all of this kind of stuff, and then we just created super high expectations, doctrine-heavy, dogma-heavy community, that was not really great at forming people and didn't value how important it is in those sort of critical moments in people's lives, of suffering, of loss, or of marriage, of celebration or whatever, to show up and celebrate, or be grateful for the presence and grace of God in those pivotal moments, because that's how people change.

Russell Moore: This is going to sound really Southern Baptist of me, but nonetheless, I believe it. The loss of the altar call without anything to replace, it is maybe not a cause of some of the things that are going on but it certainly should have been a carbon monoxide detector going off. Because in those altar calls, you saw the worst parts of evangelical Christianity. No doubt, manipulative appeals and sometimes people thinking that unless they had a crisis immediately, that they weren't really Christians. But I've been thinking about this often lately because Martin Marty in 1982 was talking in Christianity Today about why evangelical churches grow, and he sort of said, There's this mentality that evangelical churches grow when mainline churches don't because the theology is more conservative and the expectations are higher. And there's some truth to that. He said, but actually the bigger part of it is that evangelical Christianity provides a language for crisis and rebirth, of setting aside old and moving forward. He said, When you talk like that, it sounds like you're psychologically or sociologically defining things, when actually you're just talking about how the Holy Spirit works. The altar call represented the best of evangelical Christianity in the sense that every single week there was a regular pattern of people being reminded of the fact that they were sinners in need of grace. And in those congregations where someone would go forward and kneel on the - I saw this many times as a child - where someone would go forward during the invitation and kneel down on the steps and pray, and other people would come out and just put their hands on that person. Didn't know what was going on, didn't need to know what was going on. It actually was a connection point for the community that wasn't about activity, and it wasn't even about articulation. It was something deeper than that.

50 MIN

Mike Cosper: I've had so many conversations in the past year about what to do about the church, about where we look to build something better and more beautiful. I don't pretend to have all the answers because the needs are too great. But I do think the altar and the graveyard might be a great place to start. Living life in the light of our death ought to cure us of our grandiosity. It should also inoculate us a bit from those who come around with a big, loud movement and promise us they have a wonderful plan for our lives. Gathering at the altar offers a similar cure. We kneel there as sinners in need of mercy, and if we truly believe in the power and the danger of sin, it should temper our ambitions. But maybe the most important part of that image is the gathered community around us, wordlessly laying on hands and praying. That's something that can happen in any church of any size. It costs nothing. It requires no special training. It only requires faith in Jesus and a commitment to the good and flourishing of those around you. At its most basic, it just requires showing up.

Movements that gather around charismatic leaders arrive with a lot of sound and fury, and getting caught up in one is a hell of a drug. But there's a fuel there that eventually burns out, especially the closer you are to the center of it. And in the end, those who burn out or raise concerns are cast aside, worse than they were before they were found. What would it look like for us to resist being enamored with numbers and noise. Maybe instead of counting Sunday attendance one year, we could count hospital visits, visits to the homebound, meals cooked for those who are suffering, and funerals we've attended. What would it look like for the church to embrace all the small ways we can offer those who feel rootless, restless, and alone, a sense of belonging.

Mike Cosper: 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 mixed by Mike Cosper. This episode was edited by TJ Hester. Our associate producers are Azurae Phelps and Joy Beth Smith. Music by Kate Siefker and Dan Phelps. Graphic design by Bryan Todd. Social media by Kate Lucky. Editorial consulting by Andrea Palpant Dilley. CT's editor in chief is Timothy Dalrymple. Thanks for listening. We'll see you soon.