



EPILOGUE

A Return to Seattle

When the road home leads to sadness,
can you hope to find more there?

SHOW NOTES

More than two years since producer Mike Cospers began recording interviews for the show, *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* returns with its most poignant episode yet—a road trip to Seattle to stand in the spaces where Mars Hill Church began.

This epilogue of the critically acclaimed podcast sends Cospers and executive producer Erik Petrik on a trip down memory lane, visiting the buildings and church members who formed the vibrant community that would one day fall apart.

From Seattle living rooms crammed with chairs to an empty sanctuary slated for demolition, discover afresh the mystery of God working in broken places. And, as you see how “time humbles and reveals all,” let the story of Mars Hill compel you toward truth not trends, grace not grandeur. Come, meet the people and places that have remained, marked indelibly with love for the gospel and for Seattle. Meet those who never left.

As this series concludes, a special thanks to: Joy Beth Smith, Andrea Palpant Dilley, Morgan Lee, Russell Moore, Ted Olsen, Daniel Silliman, and Kate Shellnutt. Thank you, especially to Tim Dalrymple and Erik Petrik, Kate Siefker, and to Sarah and the Cospers girls. Thank you to the members of Mars Hill Church, especially, Wendy Alsup, Jesse Bryan, Sutton Turner, Tim Smith, Aaron Gray, Jen Smidt, and Ben Vandermeer.

MASTHEAD

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

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Mike Cospers: It's been almost a year since we ran the final episode of the 12-part series *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*. It's been more than two years since I recorded the first interviews for the show, and it's been eight years since Mark Driscoll resigned and the church closed its doors. The podcast was called *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* for a reason. We wanted to tell the story of this church, of these people, how this story began and ended. As for Mark Driscoll himself, he's in the Phoenix area to this day, pastoring another church, denouncing his critics, and calling work like ours and many other fake news. But while in many ways he's at the center of this story, it really isn't about him. It's about the church itself, and about how it gives us a window into something larger about the church in America. So to end the show, I've taken a trip back to Seattle.

From *Christianity Today*, I'm Mike Cospers, and you are listening to *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*. It's the story of one church that grew from a handful of people to a movement, and then collapsed almost overnight. It's a story about power, fame, and spiritual trauma, problems faced across the spectrum of churches in America, and yet it's also a story about the mystery of God working in broken places. This episode is the epilogue and the end of our tale.

Let's end at the beginning. Not the beginning of Mars Hill's story, but the beginning of mine. I got involved in church planting in 2000, a few years after Mars Hill, but still at the bleeding edge of the church planting boom of the 2000s. About a year after we launched, four of us who were part of the church's leadership went to Seattle for a conference that I mentioned before on episode 3. It was called *Solarize*, and it was put on by an organization called *The Ooze*. For me, the conference itself was strange. The speakers were mostly unfamiliar, and the theology of what would later become the emergent church movement felt uncomfortable. I just really didn't get it. But our registration packet included Mars Hill's first record, and that I did get.

The four of us listened to the CD as we drove around the city, and the more I heard it and the more I heard about Mars Hill, the more curious I got. That's how I ended up at Driscoll's breakout, and this you've heard a little bit about as well.

🐦 @PastorMark

Mark Driscoll: For those of you who don't know me, I pastor a church here in the city called Mars Hill. We started—We just celebrated our fifth birthday recently. And I do church planting with Acts 29 and some other things. What else can I tell you? That's about it. I wanted to talk about the gospel and ...

Mike Cospers: There's an element of making this podcast that's been a little bit like traveling back through time. Revisiting ideas and questions we were asking. There were so many people like me who didn't feel at home in the seeker-friendly churches we'd grown up in, and frankly, we shared the kind of cynicism and feelings of rootlessness that was and is a cliched description of Gen Xers. For those of us who wanted to hold on to our evangelical convictions, we had a whole different kind of pressure coming at us. A pressure not to just reexamine the culture and practices of our churches, but to deconstruct our beliefs too. The exclusive claims of Jesus, the centrality of the gospel, and a whole host of other convictions. All of those questions and contested issues were on display at *The Ooze*, and they were all heightened by the fact that we were a month out from 9/11.

Here's Spencer Burke, the founder of the organization.

Spencer Burke: We were on October 10th, so in less than 30 days we gathered together, and people were trying to wonder what was going on. And we had organized quickly from the Muslim Student Union at, I think it was UW, and asked some Muslim leadership to come over and do a workshop. And it was fascinating because three of them were in conversation about their faith and how they connected. So you gotta understand that Room A could have Mark, and Room B could have Muslim students sharing their faith. And then at lunch you'd go to a three-hour Native American potlatch where you'd sit next to Richard Rohr, who was a Franciscan monk. Like, it was so amazing.

Mike Cospers: If you think about those two pressures coming together, not feeling at home in evangelical churches and not having interest and losing some of our essential commitments, you can understand why Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill had such powerful influence in that moment. You didn't have to wear Hawaiian shirts and sing Audio Adrenaline, and you didn't have to take ayahuasca and go on a vision quest either.

Mark Driscoll: God is not the theme of the day, and we have all of this conversation about this unknown God, and he's the sky fairy or she's the sky fairy. And it's just like this cosmic piñata that we all gather around and toss prayers to, hoping that we'll whack it and goodies will fall out. And my fear for many of you is this—and I could be a total dick about this, I probably will before I'm done—but I'm really concerned sincerely about a neoliberalism that just comes in and takes a philosophical concept and then elevates that as a new gospel. Because Scripture is clear that Galatians says that if anybody comes proclaiming another gospel, tell 'em to go to hell.

Mike Cospers: The Ooze was a microcosm of what was happening in the church at that moment. Full of the kinds of ideas that often move from the academy into the church. A kind of weird expression of modernity that wants to make this moment in history unique, requiring new specializations, new ideas, new theology, new practices. Driscoll's message here stood in stark contrast, and it was a message he'd carry with him as he rocketed to prominence in the next several years. A very direct, unapologetic confrontation with the gospel.

Mark Driscoll: Paul says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it's the power of God to everyone who believes. What are you being told that can put power into your ministry other than the gospel? I'll be the one fly in the ointment this week. That's fine. It's not 'cause I hate you, it's 'cause I love you. It's 'cause I've done everything they're telling you to do. And I woke up and I didn't have a pure heart, a clean conscience or a sincere faith, and I had to repent to God. Trying to be cool rather than faithful. Nothing will do for your church what the gospel does. Nothing.

Mike Cospers: There were plenty of problems at Mars Hill already. There were patterns of manipulation, and there was a whole underbelly of teaching on marriage and sex that hadn't made it to the surface yet. But unless you were inside Mars Hill, you didn't really see any of that. What I saw and what people liked me saw was what was on display at conferences and online and in books. In other words, it was all media, tailored for consumption by someone like me who lived 2,300 miles away and had no real connection

to life in the community. What I saw that day was the Mark Driscoll that would perform from a distance for so many of us across the country. He was telling a room full of pastors who'd come to Seattle for the latest and greatest thing, all this talk about postmodernism and inclusivity, the hip music and the film festivals. He was telling them they were caring about the wrong things.

Pastor: When people think of Mars Hill in Seattle, they go, Oh, I'm gonna go to the cool church where Mark preaches.

Mark Driscoll: Have we said anything about being the cool church?

Pastor: Yes.

Mark Driscoll: What?

Pastor: Everything. Because preaching isn't just words like you said, it's a reflection of what you do and what you ...

Mark Driscoll: It's who you are.

Pastor: Try and look cool, act cool, throw out the words.

Mark Driscoll: I am telling you to read the Bible, get some balls, and preach it.

Pastor: You know what, and I appreciate that part of what you're saying.

Mark Driscoll: I am telling you that. I'm telling you that.

Pastor: You're oversimplifying.

Mark Driscoll: No, I'm not.

Pastor: ... black and white.

Mark Driscoll: They are.

Pastor: Instead of saying both/and, you're saying either/or.

Mike Cospers: This is what makes looking back at the Mars Hill story so hard for so many people, because this message changed their lives and their ministries, and yet none of that excuses the incredible damage that was done and the awful fallout that came later. Holding those facts together can be really difficult and really confusing, and that is the essence of what I mean on each episode, when I talk about the mystery of God working in broken places.

Mark Driscoll: If I look at that tree, I will not rise from my death at the end of the age. I need Christ crucified, died, raised.

10 MIN

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Pastor: And God will reveal Christ crucified in other things.

Mark Driscoll: So people get saved by looking at creation?

Pastor: ... fundamentalist view of Scripture and it's not ...

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

Pastor: I am a universalist.

Mark Driscoll: You are a universalist.

Pastor: I am a universalist.

Mark Driscoll: You are a universalist. Okay. Then we have huge freaking issues with you.

Pastor: Of course we do.

Mark Driscoll: Because I'm not a universalist, I'm a Christian.

Pastor: ... disagreeing with people.

Mark Driscoll: I would totally disagree. That's why I'm not at the ecumenical prayer services. I love them and I pray for their salvation, but I will not have an unknown God who's a sky fairy, that I hold hands with everybody else and pretend that we're all going to usher into the kingdom together. I need Christ. I'm a wicked man. I'm an enemy of God, I'm born dead in my trespasses and sins. What I don't need is yet another religion. I need Christ.

Mike Cosper: We recorded most of this podcast during the first year of COVID, 2020 and 2021, which meant that I never met many of these people who were part of the series face to face. And so a few months ago, I flew to Seattle with Erik Petrik, the show's executive producer.

Now, I'd had a lot of contact with the members of Mars Hill before, and I had a real feel for what life was like in their community, but Erik hadn't. So as we met people face to face, the spirit of the community was familiar to me, but it was his first time seeing it up close.

Erik Petrik: I think for Kelly and I, having gone through it ourselves in our own experience with our own church, I knew how those folks felt. I could nail it in a second. These different homes were places where people congregated and talked about their faith, talked about their family, talked about their problems, talked about their hopes and dreams and all those things, and it was sad to me to think all of that was crushed because someone was more interested in themselves than they were in the people that they had gathered. That's what it felt like. And so you have all these people that are wary of everyone coming into their world.

Mike Cosper: One of the moments that was interesting to see from you, we like, pulled

into a neighborhood and it shocked you that you were like, So where are we going? And I was like, Oh, they're having us over for lunch. And you were like, Wait, they're having us into their homes?

Erik Petrik: I was amazed.

Mike Cospers: Yeah. And I felt like that was the moment where it clicked for you, what the core of what people had experienced at Mars Hill was really about, like there really was this sense of community and investment with each other.

Erik Petrik: Oh, absolutely. And it was amazing. I think I was just shocked that we were actually going to their home, stepping into their home. And then once you stepped into their home, you realized these people are gems. They're just gems. They're just like, come on in. And then we walk in and they're like, Here, have some, make yourself a sandwich. And it was, they just picked up where they left off. It's like, this is who we are, this is what we do. The one thing you and I said over and over again was most of these homes had far more chairs than they did anything else. Just chairs everywhere. And that's because they were gatherers of people.

Mike Cospers: There was a very interesting, awkward moment in particular where two people were sitting there talking and they were just chatting like it was no big, like, they'd picked up right where they left off. And then there's this moment where they pause and they go—the one says to the other one, "So when did you get out?" referring to Mars Hill. The other guy said, "Oh, I rode it out to the very end." And there's this, like, beat in the conversation where everybody's standing there. 'Cause this person didn't, this person left and it was very bad for him. And he just grins and he goes, "Well, how was that for you?" And then they moved right along.

Erik Petrik: You just think, I can't imagine how much fun these people were having at one point in time. Just how much joy, the idea of purpose, the idea of building something that was far bigger than just the present Seattle area. It was an eternal thing. And those folks were motivated by that. And to see it all go away, and to see the pain and suffering and the devastation that was caused by one guy, really, truly, who was so focused on himself. And of course he's got the gift of gab, so he's so winsome that he will gibber and squawk and mumble who knows what, and everybody will, like, be in their responses, Oh, he did apologize or Oh yeah, he is contrite. And all you have to do is go back to Seattle and interview those people and realize not one of them has ever fully been able to resolve this great conundrum. And that is this guy that said, Hey, we're gonna serve the Lord had no intention of really, truly serving the Lord. He's serving himself.

Mike Cospers: Most of the conversations we had while we were there were intentionally off the record. We just wanted to sit down and say thank you to those who'd shared their stories, and to see a little bit of their world up close. And we saw just what Erik described, that even though it's been eight years, there's still a lot of devastation.

15 MIN

There was an especially interesting moment for me when I was driving to meet someone at their workplace. I was following the phone's GPS, and as I did, I saw on my left a place called Hale's Ales. It was an old brew pub, a place that had been a neighborhood

 @TimAndSmith

staple for decades, and it was a landmark too. If you were from out of town and visiting Mars Hill, you knew you were close to the building when you saw Hale's Ales. I hadn't expected to see it on my way to this office though, and when I mentioned it to the person I met with, he said, Yeah, we're all still here, we were about Seattle and we never left.

On my last day in the city, Tim Smith came up to meet me from Portland.

Mike Cospers: I'm just trying to find a place to park.

Tim Smith: Oh, hey.

Mike Cospers: As you can hear, I didn't have much of a voice then either. Tim is probably the person I knew best from Mars Hill back when I was still in ministry as well. We did a lot of events together and we'd often talk ministry since his world and mine looked fairly similar. Tim was the pastor of worship at Mars Hill across all the campuses until he was sent to Portland in 2011 to plant the Mars Hill campus there.

Tim Smith: Sure has been a while.

Mike Cospers: Oh my gosh...

Tim Smith: It's good to see you.

Mike Cospers: It's good to see you too.

Tim came to Seattle in 1999 when the church had just a couple hundred people, and he was there until he went to Mars Hill, Portland in 2011 to open and pastor that campus. He watched it grow from a few hundred people to a church with 15 locations in five states. He served as a Mars Hill pastor until the doors closed at the end of 2014.

One of our producers made arrangements that day to stop by a few of the old Mars Hill campuses in the city, particularly the ones that Tim had been a part of. So after catching up over pancakes and coffee, we hit the road for a trip down memory lane.

So this is Ballard right here, right?

Tim Smith: Yep.

Mike Cospers: And none of this was here when you guys ...

Tim Smith: Not when we started, yeah.

Mike Cospers: There's like a Ross Dress for Less.

Tim Smith: Yeah.

Mike Cospers: Trader Joe's.

Tim Smith: Yeah. But this tavern held out. Mike's Chili. Oh my God. Mike's Chili holding strong.

Mike Cospers: Is it any good?

Tim Smith: It is terrible. I ate there once. There was like a hair in my chili. It was not good.

Mike Cospers: Oof.

Tim Smith: It's like chili dogs, chili mac, chili, like Bubba Gump.

Mike Cospers: All right, so when's the last time you saw this building?

Tim Smith: I did drive by here last summer. I drove by, but I have not been in here. The last time I was in here—oh, and Java Jan, she's still going. Full house.

Mike Cospers: There's a spot.

Tim Smith: Do you have any sense of how big this church is?

Mike Cospers: I don't.

Tim Smith: Even at the time, I remember feeling like it seemed kind of like a big building for how big the church actually was, but.

Mike Cospers: I think I did a crappy parking job.

Tim Smith: And they called this the Ballard Blocks. And yeah, for a while it became like the executive offices. Driscoll, he had this big office, like a big bathroom with a shower and everything that he had. ... Somebody had told him about that this is what guys should have. But on Sundays, he would get there in the morning, hang out there, do his final prep, then he would exit over there, come in the back door onto the stage, and then go that way, with people handling him and keeping everybody away the whole time.

Mike Cospers: That's wild.

Tim Smith: Yeah. It definitely didn't start out that way.

Mike Cospers: The Ballard building is, to my mind, the iconic Mars Hill building. Most of the videos that went viral from Driscoll were from sermons preached in that room. If you went to a conference at the church for the Resurgence or for Acts 29, you probably were in the Ballard building. It's a big rectangular brick of a building. Maybe not as ugly as a warehouse, but at the very least you'd call it utilitarian for a church building. And that suited Mars Hill when they bought it back in 2003. There really wasn't much glamorous about the church at the time. They spent money on whatever might grow it, and they were just at the beginning of spending lots of money on music and media. But flashy buildings and big salaries simply weren't a priority back then. They sold the building to Quest Church in 2015, and that church still owns it and meets there today. The church's

pastors and leaders asked us not to record on site, but they were really kind and generous with their time, and they took us through to tour the building.

All right, so any emotion at all from walking through that building?

Tim Smith: Oh yeah, A lot. Even just getting involved in Mars Hill was a huge thing for me, but the Ballard building is really where I came into my own, where I really kind of became a lot of what I guess I have become, pastorally, musically, leadership-wise. After we left Ballard, we grew through multiplying new locations, but no single location ever had more people than there. And then we grew to 6- or 7,000, maybe more, at that one spot.

Mike Cospers: That day I could tell there was a lot to process, more than he could probably respond to in the moment. So Tim and I ended up reconnecting afterwards on the mic to talk a little more.

Tim Smith: I've told a lot of stories over the course of the podcast, but one of them that's most emotionally affecting thinking back on it is the first time we did spontaneous baptisms on an Easter, and my oldest daughter got baptized spontaneously, while I was playing, and put down my guitar.

Pastor: Want to do it?

Tim Smith: Yeah, I'll just do it over the edge here. Do you love Jesus? Why do you love Jesus? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

It was some of the first sermons I preached, it was where I recorded music and became a dad. It's like one of those scenes in a film where the person walks in and it just starts replaying in your mind, cinematically. It was very much like that. Like I could have probably just stood on those stages and spaced out for hours. Ballard was—when we first came and started getting involved in this area—it was very sleepy. There was nothing cool, there was no good restaurants. It was all, like, old Scandinavian fishermen dive bars, which have an appeal, but.

Mike Cospers: Sure.

Tim Smith: Did you ever hear of the Tractor Tavern?

Mike Cospers: No.

Tim Smith: That was the only cool thing that went on here. So Tractor was like a roots, alt country, Americana bluegrass bar on old Ballard Avenue that was like a mainstay. That was the one thing that kind of brought cool kids.

Mike Cospers: Our next stop was the Earl building. This was the building before the move to Ballard. It's a smallish church in a nice residential neighborhood. Today, it's the home of Westside Church, and one of their pastors, Corbett Stubbard, showed us around.

Corbett Stubbard: Yeah, they're meeting over in the Loyal Heights.

Tim Smith: That's right.

Corbett Stubbert: A community center.

Tim Smith: Yeah.

Corbett Stubbert: And ended up buying this from Mark.

Tim Smith: That's right.

Corbett Stubbert: Like, probably four or five years before I came.

Tim Smith: That's right. So it's the same church that we sold it to, yeah.

Corbett Stubbert: Yeah. I never was here when he did it, but he used to, like, bring a group of people through and show 'em the origins of this church and stuff.

Tim Smith: Interesting. How long have you been with the church?

Corbett Stubbert: I've been here like 15 years, pastor for 12.

Tim Smith: Okay. Wow, nice.

Corbett Stubbert: Yeah.

Mike Cospers: There's a sign on the wall in the auditorium saying max capacity for the building is 160 people. Between four services, Mars Hill would have more than a thousand showing up—sitting on the steps outside, running a video feed to the basement, and just packing people in as much as they could. For that very reason, the neighbors weren't big fans of the church. After Westside took over, they still occasionally had to deal with fallout from things that Driscoll would say or do because the building was associated with Mars Hill.

Corbett Stubbert: Richard, founding pastor, was preaching, and this guy busted through the back doors in the middle of the service, and he had, like, full riding gear, like white spandex and the shoes that clipped in and everything, and he comes busting through in the middle of the service. He goes, "Is this the church that hates yoga and women?" Like at the top of his lungs. And we're like, No. We're like, If you want to come sit down, you're welcome to sit down. And then we realized what was going on. Mark had just said something about yoga or whatever and started frustrating people. So yeah. He just busted in thinking that this was still Mars Hill.

Tim Smith: Amazing, yeah.

Mike Cospers: When you enter the church, you can turn left and enter the auditorium or walk straight ahead into the church's offices. We ended up in the offices and a few things had changed. One of the offices that used to house a couple of staff members was now a bathroom, but the pastor's office hadn't changed much at all. The walls were

still filled with the bookshelves Driscoll had built when he moved in.

Tim Smith: First office that he had at a church building. This was our first actual ... This is our first actual church building that we ever had. So before, we were renting spaces, and then we got the Paradox Club in the U district where we had shows, and then we did an evening service. We were still meeting at First Presbyterian and it had only been an evening gathering, Mars Hill was only evening. And it was the first morning gathering we had, and from that point it just blew up. So the church had grown, like, 50 to 100 percent every year, the first 10 years of the church, except the year that we were here because we just could not fit anybody else in. But like you said, we would have 500-plus at a gathering in this crazy little building, breaking every code that could be broken, pissing off the neighbors.

Corbett Stubbart: It's interesting, that little church, Richard was in communication with them 'cause he was over at the Loyal Heights. So they were gonna gift it to Richard, but then they found out that the origins of our church was Assemblies of God, and they were like, "Nope." And so they said no, and Mark was kind of in conversation with them at the same time. And so Richard said, Hey... Actually no, he wasn't in conversation at the same time. Richard actually said, "Hey, there's this young pastor who's really coming up." And I think actually Richard may have connected with this church. Because he was in communication with them, and he was gonna be gifted the church until they found out we were Assemblies of God.

Tim Smith: I think I remember.

Mike Cospers: Walking around this church felt similar to walking around the Ballard building. Tim just had a whole lot of joy on his face. He stood on that platform, and he told stories about the services that took place there, and he was almost bouncing on his toes. It was interesting to watch, something I could identify with too, and similar to what we'd experienced when gathering with other former members of the church that week. You saw part of them come alive, reconnecting with something that once meant so much to them. But you also felt this undercurrent of sadness, the weight of the loss of something that had been so beautiful.

We'll be right back.

Mike Cospers: It wasn't intentional, but it turned out that the drive through Seattle that Tim and I took was a walk backward through time. We'd started at Ballard, his last location in the city, and then the Earl building. After that, we drove by what used to be the Paradox Theater in the U District. For several years it had been an improv comedy club, but it died during COVID. The building's now behind a chain link fence, deep in decay. Our last stop was in the heart of downtown Seattle.

Tim Smith: There was a couple hundred people. They had stopped meeting at all in the big room, and this is this little, kind of, chapel. That's where they met. So they were happy to rent it out to us because it was a little bit of income, and they had no use for the big room anymore. But it's like 50-foot ceilings, all marble inside, so it's like the worst possible acoustics imaginable, and we had drums and single speaker cluster from the

ceiling and center, just for speech. They had an organ and a piano and a preacher mic.

What hit me the hardest was First Presbyterian downtown. First Presbyterian was where Mars Hill was meeting when I first came to Seattle. The church had folded, and it was also slated for, like, demolition and development, probably some new giant Seattle condoplex. And particularly the story of First Presbyterian. It's a really interesting history because First Pres in its day was a big deal. They were founded and led by a powerful personality. This guy, George Whitworth, there's a university named after him. He was an evangelist who had preached the gospel in downtown Seattle, and it was a church of thousands. They had a radio show that they broadcast out of their balcony, which was the cutting-edge technology of that day. And then after their heyday, unlike Mars Hill, which had a steep and sharp decline, it for decades just kind of like slowly faded away until during COVID they finally folded as a congregation. And then the last people involved, some kind of board that was left, sold it to a developer, and so now it's gonna be a condoplex.

And I think just the symbolism of it, how cyclical that is. I find myself using the phrase—because I just don't have a better one—but it's the rise and fall of so many things. There's so many things that rise and fall—organizations, personalities, leaders, all these things—in the world around us, and I think what really stuck out to me is just the sense that time humbles and reveals all. And so what really came to mind is, to turn a now extremely well-worn quote that was in the title sequence up until recently, which is really just, How dare us. Like, who the hell do we think we are? And I say that to myself, I say that to Driscoll, and I say that to anyone else who believed the hype over the years. There's such a thin line between godly ambition and unhinged delusions of grandeur. There is a thin line between evangelism and self-promotion and platform building. And time is what reveals it.

I am sure that they thought they ... First Presbyterian, from the history that I read, was the biggest PC(USA) church in the country, maybe the world, in their heyday. At least they thought that, or enough for somebody to write about it. And that's what we talked about. Like, we were maybe the largest Reformed, complementarian—whatever other qualifications you wanna put on there—but that the world had ever seen. And who knows, maybe we were, I don't know, I'm not a historian. And yet what we did with that for ourselves, how we used that to feed our own dignity and value and worth, is just destined to come apart, and time is so much of what does that. So I think I was really just struck, reflecting on, like, man, who do we think we are, doing these kinds of things in God's name, but playing at being God ourselves in the process.

Mike Cospers: I had a similar thought when we were walking around First Pres. The building was behemoth. It's built in this postwar architectural style that's known as brutalism. It would look equally at home in Soviet Russia or an Ayn Rand novel. Big, not beautiful, but imposing like it would be there forever. And it'll be knocked down and replaced with condos and parking garages before long.

We finished that walk around the building in downtown Seattle, and ended up on the corner with the church's offices and classrooms. The car was parked nearby, and Tim and I were about to part ways. He pointed to a window on the building and he said, "Hey,

there it is.” It took me a minute to get my bearings. We were just a block or two away from a building called Town Hall that had hosted The Ooze conference back in 2001. Tim was pointing to a window on the room where the breakout at The Ooze had been, the room where I’d first heard Mark Driscoll speak. I was literally ending the story where it began.

As I stood there, a line from his talk popped into my head, one that I’ve thought about nonstop for 21 years.

Mark Driscoll: So what really has captured my heart in the past few years is I think the place that we’re at right now is that the gospel is a diamond and that The spirit of the age is just a dung hill, and as that diamond rolls down a hill, after a while you get more dung than diamond. And then reformation is the place of chipping away and getting back to what originally was worthwhile, that first poetic image rather than all the man-made images that we’ve layered on top of that.

Mike Cospers: Mark didn’t have any idea what kind of damage he’d do in the years ahead, but what he said about the gospel was true. It just turned out that he was the architect of his own dung hill.

There’s no shortage of warning tales about grandiosity, from Homer to Stanley, from Shakespeare to George Lucas. The human heart knows the dangers of the lust for power, and yet we can’t seem to help but grasp for it again and again.

I’ve spent a lot of time thinking and talking about how the church moves forward over the last year, and as I close the book on this series, I have to admit that I don’t really know, and I’m not sure anyone really does. And maybe that’s okay, because maybe there’s not a clever strategy that’s gonna save us and guide us through that. Because God’s the one that’s gonna clean the diamond, sift the wheat from the chaff, and prepare the church for whatever comes next. Maybe what’s most important for us instead is to die to our own grand plans, to simply tell the truth about all that’s broken, both in our churches and ourselves, and to turn to God with that spirit of brokenness. To come in search of grace, to hold out these stories like a beggar holding out his hands, saying simply, How long, oh Lord?

35 MIN

Mike Cospers: There are a handful of people without whom this show couldn’t have happened. I couldn’t possibly thank them all, but specifically let me mention a few.

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The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill is a production of Christianity Today. Our executive producer is Erik Petrik. I produced and edited this episode. Music and mixing by Kate Siefker. Sound design by Kate Siefker and me. Our associate producers for this episode are Azurae Phelps and Joy Beth Smith. Matt Stevens is our director of operations. Graphic design by Bryan Todd. Social media by Kate Lucky. Editorial consulting by Andrea Palpant Dilley. CT's editor in chief is Russell Moore. Thanks for listening.