



The Things We Do To Women

When churches use sexuality to foster and motivate male commitment, women find themselves on the losing end.

SHOW NOTES

Sex sells. It might be hard to imagine a church harnessing this popular marketing technique for church growth, but that's exactly what Mark Driscoll did in Seattle in the early 2000s. Whether condemning the Western erosion of manhood or elevating women as Christian pornographic ideals, preaching from the Mars Hill pulpit mixed toxic cultural messages with biblical theology in the name of forming men, women, and families for God. And, like [Mark's campaign against diminished manhood](#), when sex sold in church, both men and women came up short.

In this episode of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, host Mike Cospers addresses the femininity, fear, and fantasy that fueled conversations around gender and womanhood at Mars Hill. With delicate care, he unpacks the reactionary stream of sexuality that emerged at Mars Hill and exposes the struggle for authority and power beneath Mark Driscoll's classic sermons on womanhood and sex. Cospers explores what happens when words meant to protect women end up hurting them and how theology about headship and submission can create fear and shame when wielded by the wrong hands. If you've seen Mark's famous viral videos or heard the sermon sound bites, tune in to this episode for the fuller story.

MASTHEAD

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

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TRANSCRIPT

 @MikeCosp

Mike Cosp: Before we start today's show, an important warning. This episode deals with issues of sexuality and gender, including discussion of sex, pornography, and sexual assault. As before, we're censoring swearing, but the content is frank and weighty, so we wanted to advise you in advance.

 @dr_jessjohnson

Jessica Johnson: There was something that was very... that was absent in men's lives.

Mike Cosp: This is Jessica Johnson. You heard her on our last episode. She's a scholar in religious studies at the College of William and Mary, and she spent two years attending Mars Hill to try and understand the dynamics that shaped and motivated that community.

Jessica Johnson: And I think on the broader culture, that language of masculinity crisis, the kind of positive connotations for that in terms of what men could pull from that, is that there was a channel and an outlet for that desire to be good men, to be men with a sense of purpose. I think the problem is that, unfortunately, then that gets couched in terms of, well, feminists and women's rights and women in the workplace. And any kind of empowerment of women outside of the home was then unfortunately problematized.

Mike Cosp: For his part, Mark Driscoll's expectations for women in the church were unambiguous. He communicates his view again and again in sermon after sermon. But probably nowhere does he make it as explicit as here in a talk that was part of a series of sessions he led for women at Mars Hill in 2001.

 @PastorMark

Mark Driscoll: You may be able to show me a family where the kids are well loved and the wife works full time and everything is great, and I will show you a thousand that are not, and I will tell you that the majority should speak loudly. And in this church, that's the way it's going to be. I won't lie to you. Because I am responsible for the families, and I'm responsible for the conditions of the homes.

Mike Cosp: I have to admit, I find the audacity of that clip pretty astounding. To say with such rigid authority, that's the way it's going to be. And what you find when you poke around at Mars Hill was that's pretty much how it was. Men and women felt compelled by that vision, either finding a sense of calling in it or believing it was the right thing to do because it came from the guy in the pulpit with the Bible. And again, it wasn't just that men should provide and women should be home. It was also that Mars Hill families should buy houses, grow deep roots in the community, and that they should have lots of kids if they can.

 @TimAndSmith

Tim Smith: If a woman was interested in anything outside of the home, the advice and the challenge to the men was to lead your wife better, and the advice to the women was to get married if they weren't, and if they were, to have another kid.

Mike Cosp: This is Tim Smith, talking about the way these ideas practically worked out in the life of the church.

Tim Smith: Because then they wouldn't have time for as many other ambitions. And at multiple points, particularly early on in the church, it was seen as a disqualification for

leadership and specifically the office of elder if a wife worked outside of the home.

Mike Cospers: From Christianity Today, this is Mike Cospers, 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. Today, Episode Five, The Things We Do to Women.

As we covered on our previous episode, Driscoll believed that if you reached men, you'd reach everyone else. And part of his strategy was to teach on masculinity, gender, and sex regularly. It's hard to even track how often it was the subject or point of emphasis in a sermon. Most of Mars Hill's sermon series are on books of the Bible, and so you'll find sermons on sex and gender in obvious places like Proverbs or Song of Songs, both of which were covered twice in Mars Hill history. Or you'll find it in topical series, like Real Marriage. But you'll also find sermons on marriage and dating in series from Genesis, 1 Corinthians, Ruth and Ephesians, and in pop-up topical series, like Religion Saves or the Trials series.

And that's to say nothing of the lengthy asides Mark with make on gender, like the 25-minute aside on manhood he took during a sermon on genealogy in the book of Luke. Along with all of this came corresponding teaching on femininity and the role of women in the church, which also appears to have been part of the reactionary spirit of the church's founding.

While there have always been streams in the church where these specific gender roles have been norms, there was also a renewal of these ideas happening during Mars Hill's lifetime, a throwback to a previous era of evangelicalism.

Kristin Kobes Du Mez: So the ideal of male protector really comes to the fore during the cold war era, and then it kind of makes sense.

Mike Cospers: This is Kristin Kobes Du Mez, historian and author of Jesus and John Wayne.

Kristin Kobes Du Mez: Because you've got this military threat communism, which is perceived as it's anti-God, it's anti-family, and it's anti-American. So all of the things that conservative evangelicals held dear. And so in the early cold war era, and really throughout the cold war, we see evangelicals who have embraced Christian nationalism also embrace a military defense of Christian nationalism, and they hold this together with their support of what we might call gender traditionalism - the idea that men and women are given very distinct roles, and the role of protector is given to men, and men are equipped to do this work and they are called to use violence when necessary in order to fulfill their God-given duties. This is kind of the structure of society, this is the structure of families, and this is God-ordained.

Mike Cospers: Starting in the mid-60's though, this order gets disrupted. You have on the one hand, the Vietnam War, undermining America's vision of itself, and on the other you

have the sexual revolution calling into question the way we understand sex, commitment and family. For many evangelicals, these pressures actually strengthen their sense of commitment to their values and strengthen their sense that metaphorically and literally they may have to fight to defend them.

Kristin Kobes Du Mez: Their conception of Christian truth is linked up with these other values, and in this case also with a kind of militant masculinity, the idea that God made men to defend all that they hold dear, and even to defend and protect God, to protect Christianity. And you see this ebb and flow. Again, in the 1990s, a number of evangelicals are stepping back from this more militant conception of masculinity. Not coincidentally, the cold war has come to an end and everything seems up for grabs.

Mike Cospser: You can look at what's happening in the church in the nineties, and it's an interesting time with regard to gender. Bill Hybels is one of the leading personalities in the church, and along with his mentor, Gilbert Bilezikian, he's making an argument for elevating women into leadership. A few years earlier, an organization called Christians for Biblical Equality was established by theologians including Bilezikian, Catherine Clark Kroeger, Roger Nicole, and Joanne Lyon. They authored a statement entitled Men, Women, and Biblical Equality, which laid the case out for evangelical egalitarianism. Likewise, it's the time of the rise of the Promise Keepers, and while they called men to see themselves as protectors, they also called them to embrace emotion in ways that broke with traditional notions of how men should appear. Mark Driscoll emerges in ministry at about this time. Here's how he described attending a Promise Keepers rally in the nineties.

Mark Driscoll: And I thought, Well, great, men's meeting, in a football stadium. This will work. And I get there, and the first thing I see is all the leaders are wearing pastel colors, and the guys are up on the stage singing love songs to Jesus. And next thing I know, a guy kind of preaches, and all of a sudden I've got a bunch of guys I've never met, crying and hugging me. I was like, What in the world is this, I've been to football games here and they don't do this at halftime.

Mike Cospser: Culture is always an ebb and flow. And so if feminism or the egalitarian movement, or a broadening of the definition of masculinity is a current running in one direction, it's predictable to imagine something else emerging that runs the other way. And Driscoll was certainly a figure in that countercurrent, but he wasn't alone. About a decade before this, a group of scholars, including Wayne Grudem, John Piper, Wayne House, and Dorothy Patterson gathered after an annual meeting of the evangelical theological society.

10 MIN

As Grudem put it in Reflections from 2009, We all were saying that we had to do something because egalitarians were taking over the ETS. Their meeting paved the way for others, and soon the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood was born, a source of academic and popular resources arguing for a complementarian understanding of gender in the church.

There are other names you can add to this list, from John Eldredge to Doug Wilson, who were also emerging with renewed masculine vision at the time, and Du Mez traces all of

this out in her book. But the catalyst as she sees it, that gives this movement energy and momentum, is 9/11 and the attacks on the World Trade Center, Flight 93, and the Pentagon. A simmering anxiety emerges in evangelicals making a muscular version of masculinity attractive once again.

Kristin Kobes Du Mez: You will hear very clear echoes of this earlier ideology. The idea that feminism had emasculated American manhood and made the nation vulnerable to attack by radical Islam. And it's up to Christian men to defend America, and it's up to Christian men to raise strong boys into strong men because this emasculating, and all the emasculating powers of secular culture and liberal culture and feminism, have eroded the strength and masculinity of American manhood.

Mike Cospers: Now, I'll be honest. When I first heard this argument, I thought the 9/11 thing was a little bit too on the nose. But then while I was working on this project, I came across this audio of Driscoll, late 2001, talking about this very subject.

Mark Driscoll: There is an intense femininity that has crept into Christianity. Islam is a masculine religion. That's why they run an airplane in the World Trade Center, and we meet in Central Park in New York, and we get men like Elton John to play the piano and cry. That's our response as a nation. Gay men with wigs cry because mean men with facial hair beat us.

Mike Cospers: You can sort of map this out, how post 9/11 anxiety intersects with a sense that the sexual revolution was out to take advantage of women and destroy the family. You can also throw postmodernism into the mix, the feeling that truth itself was in the balance. Now add feminism and secularism and the loss of a sense of identity and meaning that permeated movies and literature at the turn of the century.

Kristin Kobes Du Mez: These fears were actively stoked by conservative evangelical leaders who had a direct interest in stoking fears in order to consolidate their own power. And we see that in the history of conservative evangelicalism. So somebody like Jerry Falwell Sr., and Thomas Road Baptist Church absolutely followed this formula. But I really think that the best example of that is Mark Driscoll.

Mike Cospers: It may feel like we've drifted from the subject at hand, but this background helps us understand the subtle, even insidious ways that a church like Mars Hill can exert extraordinary influence over people's lives, along with experiences like we explored last week, those moments of grace and growth. There's a subversive, but equally powerful sense of fear at work. The messages that the world is dangerous and it wants to rob you of meaning, of relationships, of family, of legacy. Other churches, you're told, are a mess too, because maybe they believe the wrong things or they have the wrong leaders, or they just don't have nearly the results that a place like Mars Hill does. So you join the community because of a sense of safety and certainty that it offers. This place has the answers and it's fighting the good fight. And when you experience challenges and difficulties, as so many people did, that sense of fear comes back to haunt you, holding you in place, making it hard to imagine being anywhere else.

You've heard a portion of this next clip before, but it's worth revisiting here.

15 MIN

 @sometimesalight

Kristin Kobes Du Mez: It was really essential to Driscoll's power to present the outside world as the enemy. By using war metaphors, he could demand absolute obedience and he did, he could demand loyalty from his followers. So you question him, you're out. And there's this framework: If you're not with us, you're against us. And of course Mark could describe or define who was with us and who was against us.

Mike Cosper: And that loops back to the question of authority. For most of Mars Hill's history, the church operated with a strict hierarchy of authority, and Mark spoke about it from the pulpit nearly as often as he spoke about masculinity. He described how children submitted to parents, wives submitted to husbands, church members submitted to the elders, and the elders submitted to Jesus. That may sound intuitive enough, but the level of authority exercised between elders and church members could be extraordinary, separating husbands and wives for a season, intervening in psychiatric care, demanding written confessions of histories of sinful behavior, or requiring strict shunning of former staff members or friends.

And that's only scratching the surface of an issue that could fill another whole podcast. The point, though, is to highlight the significant level of authority modeled by Mars Hill's leaders. It was a model, intentional or not, for the dynamic of headship and submission between a husband and wife.

Hannah Anderson: There was always this underlying oppositional nature between the genders.

Mike Cosper: This is Hannah Anderson. She's a writer whose work has explored the image of God, human flourishing, calling and gender. Here she's describing what she saw as the theological framework at Mars Hill for the relationships between men and women.

Hannah Anderson: His theology tried to resolve that by the authority submission paradigm, but I don't know that he saw men and women as partners so much as opposing forces, and one would have to dominate. And with everything else about the way things were war and things were a fight, it's not surprising that that kind of framing would come into gender relationships. And so I think that probably was resolved by kind of the man is supposed to be head of the home, if the wife submits then that's how we resolve that tension, rather than a vision for partnering.

Mike Cosper: I think Mark probably did see life as hierarchical. He might've framed it as authority and submission, or as covenant headship, but in the end, I think he meant the same thing. And this too wasn't a unique thing for Mars Hill. It lines up neatly with ideas about the church and home that had been popularized decades earlier by people like James Dobson and Bill Gothard. For a woman, then, to live inside the ecosystem at Mars Hill meant to accept the idea that you would have a hierarchical relationship with someone. To use Anderson's term, you'd either be dominated by a good man or a bad one. Good men at Mars Hill were expected to be fighters on behalf of women in the church, be it their wives, daughters, or a single woman. And the mistreatment of women could often be the catalyst for some of the most intense exercises in church discipline in the history of the church. From the pulpit, Mark talked about this all the time, and often with

expressions or even threats of violence. He'd make threatening comments about how men in the church would beat up guys who were sleeping with their girlfriends, or make intimidating see me after the service comments during Q&A's.

But this was just part of the larger church culture. Mark often spoke in violent terms, whether it was in talking about himself as a street brawler at heart, talking about his desire to break arrogant, young guys' noses, or talking in one sermon in particular about how he wanted to beat up some of his own elders.

It was pretty well known that in certain contexts like redemption groups, men would face varying levels of intimidation and aggressive, confrontational behavior. I also don't think it was much of a secret that Mark had a temper behind closed doors. And this leads me to one of the more complex elements in the Mars Hill story. That anger in Mark, particularly when he was speaking about the abuse and mistreatment of women, was by all accounts, legitimate. Mark had a heart for women who'd been abandoned by men.

One ex member said they couldn't count how many single moms Mark would buy groceries for, and another talked about his willingness - especially early in the church - to drop everything and help a woman in crisis. I've heard from a number of abuse survivors who heard Mark's words and Mark's anger about abusive men and thought, Finally, somebody sees me. And yet for so many others, their experience was quite different. Whatever gratitude they felt for his willingness to pay attention to the issue was often crowded out because his solution was yet one more way for them to be marginalized. It was as though the only thing that could stop a bad, violent man from subordinating a woman was a good, violent man subordinating the same woman. But in the end, when it comes to creating a culture in your church, you can't glorify violence and condemn it at the same time.

Maybe the most over the top example of this at Mars Hill came in March, 2009, in a sermon called Marriage and Men. I remember it clearly because it kinda went viral. A friend emailed it to me with the memorable subject line: Dude, Driscoll lost his ***. It's near the end of a sermon that's more than 70 minutes long. He's been talking about a lot of the themes we've covered: Responsibility, getting a job, honoring women. And then towards the end, he starts with this kind of exasperated sigh.

Mark Driscoll: Some of you guys, it's just... It's so frustrating. Some of you guys have been coming here for years. You've still got your hands all over your girlfriend. Some of you guys been coming here for years; you're still not praying with your wife.

Mike Cospers: He goes on like this for a while, naming different scenarios where he thinks men are falling short. We'll skip ahead.

Mark Driscoll: Some of you've already whispered in her ear: I'm sorry, I'll do better, trust me, let's just move on real quickly. How dare you! Who in the hell do you think you are?!

Mike Cospers: Yep, it's that clip.

Mark Driscoll: Abusing a woman, neglecting a woman, being a coward, a fool. Being

20 MIN

like your father, Adam. Who do you think you are?! You are not God. You are just a man. You're not an impressive man.

Mike Cospers: This part goes on for a while too. And it's a total of just shy of a minute of actual screaming. That may not sound like a lot, and maybe if you're Dennis Lixzen from *Refused*, it isn't. But for most mere mortals, keeping up a solid minute of full voice screaming is a long time. Here's how he lands the plane.

Mark Driscoll: Some of you right now, you guys will get all angry: How dare he yell at me. That's the Holy Spirit telling you it's you, you change now, little boy. You shut up, you put your pants on, you get a job, you grow up, and maybe one day you can love a woman.

Mike Cospers: From the moment I first watched this, something about it felt a little off to me. In working on this project, I've probably heard it a few dozen times and that feeling only increased. The first thing, I think, is the degree to which he's addressing the camera in the video. Not deliberately, not cheating out towards it, but as he scans the room, his eyes just keep landing on the lens. And by this time the cameras had been in the room for years. I'd also say I've watched a whole lot of Mark and there's something in the body language that isn't quite right either. It's not like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* wrong, more like he's borrowing somebody else's coat and it doesn't quite fit. Then I think what got me more recently is this element that's tagged onto the end.

Mark Driscoll: We're going to do something we've never done. We're going to pass the plate. You can give your tithes and offerings. Early on in the church, 1995 or '6, we didn't. I didn't want anyone to think bad of me. I have not led well in this area. We have people who come to church every week, they don't worship. They take, they don't participate. We'll pass the plate. If you're disconnected, please fill out the visitor card.

Mike Cospers: I don't want to sound cynical, but that's weird, right? Fill out the visitor card, in the middle of this.

Mark Driscoll: Don't lose this opportunity to get connected so we could help. When you're ready, you take communion. But you men, you hear me this. You apologize to your wife before you take communion.

Mike Cospers: You may be wondering what's the point in this exercise. Well, it's a few things, all of which are relevant to this discussion. First, I do think you have to interrogate why this is happening and why it happened the way it happened. At the time the video went viral back in 2009, I knew Mars Hill had a bunch of services, and I wondered if this happened at just one of them. After all, he tells the audience that any emotions they feel aren't because he's screaming at them. It's the Holy Spirit, he says.

In an interview a few years later with Dennis Rainey, Mark described the day like this:

Mark Driscoll: Yeah, I was preaching that sermon and my notes are usually very minimal, I make up most of the cross-references and illustrations. They just sort of happen in the moment, I'm more of an extemporaneous preacher. And so I just kinda got fired up.

25 MIN

Mike Cospers: A little later, he compared it to how he does counseling sessions with men.

Mark Driscoll: Yeah, I just started thinking about those guys, and all of a sudden what was a sermon just sort of shifted into a counseling session that everybody got to watch, because usually that's how I go at those guys when the doors are closed.

Mike Cospers: Well, it turns out there were five services that Sunday, and I was able to confirm that Mark screamed just like this at all five. Someone who was intimately familiar with all of these operations confirmed that the whole thing was planned and rehearsed. It was made by Mark for TV, and I'm yet to meet someone for whom it was a pivot point in their life. They're probably out there, don't get me wrong. I just haven't heard from them myself. I suppose there's an echo in it to that Saturday morning when Mark called all the men to The Paradox and screamed at them for a couple of hours. But if so, the later one is a mass market reproduction. The intimacy of The Paradox and the performative nature of the other just make them categorically different. Now, here's the thing I find most disturbing. There's a prop in this sermon. It's never quite in the screen, but it's there the whole time. It's not the video screen over to the side, and it's not something in the background. It's not even on the platform at all. The prop is the woman that Driscoll is defending. Listen again. Where does she go? What does she do? What are her options if she feels trapped in a dead end or if he is abusive, or if he's already gone and she's alone? It's all radio silent on that front, because she's a prop for Mark's primary audience: Men. Even in the closing prayer, she's a prop again, mentioned only to remind men one more time that they're cowards and chauvinists.

Let me be clear. I'm not suggesting that Mars Hill didn't help women in need. I'm certain that they did. I know Mark personally did, and I've heard from a few of them myself. But overwhelmingly, women have described Mars Hill as a place where they needed to recede. That when it came to anything serious or weighty, it was business for men to address.

Someone I talked to you just the other day said that you should always ask who benefits, and that stuck with me as I've worked on this story. So if you look at this moment in the church's history, when men were called out because of their failure to care for, and provide for, and protect women and ask who benefits, maybe some of the men did. Maybe some got their act together, but I've never met a person who was changed by the power of shame. Not for the better anyway. I also have a hard time imagining how women benefited. Maybe if there was some massive renewal among the men, but if that happened, it's a story no one's told me yet. I do, however, know one person that did benefit from it. And if you're not sure who that is, go check YouTube or Amazon. He got a book deal out of it.

We'll be right back.

Jessica Johnson: So I entered the church in 2006. At that time, I was not attending a church; I don't either right now. So I'm not a Christian, but I have experienced going to church as a Catholic.

Mike Cospers: This is Jessica Johnson again, talking about the first time she attended Mars Hill.

Jessica Johnson: And what fascinated me about Mars Hill when I first entered it... So we're in Seattle, this liberal beacon. I'd heard that the theology was conservative, but it was culturally liberal, and so that was really fascinating to me. I was interested in how this church was then talking about things like marriage and family. And when I first sat down, what I found and discovered immediately is that the worship band played, Mark came out. It was very much like, Here's the rock star about to preach, and he opened with a joke before the sermon. And the joke was from Talladega Nights, Will Ferrell's movie, where he plays Ricky Bobby.

Mark Driscoll: And he repeatedly prays to baby Jesus - actually eight-pound, six-ounce, baby Jesus in your golden fleece diaper. And he keeps praying, Thank you, baby Jesus, for my smoking hot wife. And that's become sort of a recurring theme in our house. My wife, for example, came out the other day and said, How do I look in these jeans. I said, Thank you, Jesus, for my smoking hot wife. And so that is the new theme, at least for this season, at the Driscoll house.

Jessica Johnson: So that was interesting that he would start, preface the sermon this way. And not only did he do that, but he gestured on stage as though he was slapping his wife's **. When I saw that, and heard the laughter, I thought to myself, This place is where I want to invest a lot of time.

Mike Cospers: Johnson's time at Mars Hill would result in a book called Biblical Porn: Affect, Labor, and Pastor Mark Driscoll's Evangelical Empire. In the book, she examines the way Mars Hill's vision of sexuality was at the core of the church's identity and mission. Biblical Porn refers to the way sexuality was instrumentalized and commodified, and used as a way to foster and motivate commitment to the church.

Jessica Johnson: Porn could be everywhere, basically. It was in the grocery store, on the cover of Cosmo. It was that woman who looked across the car window into your car that day. And he would preach on the fact that these images would come up in men's minds like almost like an internal Rolodex. And that wives, because of this, had to please their husbands sexually whenever and however they wanted, otherwise their men would clearly go outside of marriage for sex. So wives were basically expected to save and be saviors for their husbands who could not control their lustful drives and desires.

Mike Cospers: This is the dark underside of the overexpressed masculinity of Mars Hill. Women who were all ready defined in subordination to their husbands, who were already relegated away from the opportunities of the marketplace, were also pressed to conform to a pornographic ideal. But as Johnson describes, it's not a problem that's unique to Mars Hill. I don't see Mars Hill as an outlier at all. And honestly, the way that Mark would preach on sex was not that uncommon for pastors at that time. In terms of sex should be free, enjoyed within heterosexual Christian marriage, that was understood as something that pastors were starting to actively preach from the pulpit. And we can talk about the fact that in the 1970s, Tim LaHaye and his wife published a book, even - that early - that was kind of like the evangelical Joy of Sex. So there's a historical tracing that we could do here too, where some of the message itself was not that strange or taboo or uncommon.

Mike Cospers: But while the subject wasn't off limits, Driscoll certainly took it in direc-

tions that others hadn't. Some of that was a matter of tone, but some of it was with how directly he spoke to the kind of transactional sexuality that came along with that mindset. For instance, here, he's teaching from the Song of Solomon at a church in Scotland. And if you're wondering, this is definitely one of those sections we were warning you about upfront.

Mark Driscoll: I'm glad to report to you, but oral sex is biblical. Amen? No, you can do better than that. The wife performing oral sex on the husband is biblical. God's men said, amen. Ladies, your husbands appreciate oral sex. They do. So serve them, love them well.

I'll tell you a story, if you don't tell anyone else, of a man who started attending our church because of oral sex. So many women go to church, I think in your country it's 60 or 70%: My husband won't come to church, he doesn't have any interest in the things of God, he doesn't understand why church would apply to him. We had a woman like that in our church, she became a Christian, her husband was not a Christian. He hated the church, wanted nothing to do with the church. She kept brow beating him about Jesus. You need to get saved, you're going to burn in hell. He had no interest in that. And so finally I was teaching a class on sex and she said, Oh, so oral sex on a husband is what a wife is supposed to do. I said, Yes. She said, My husband's always wanted that, but I've refused him. I went to first Peter 3. I said, The Bible says if your husband is not a Christian, that you were to win him over with deeds of kindness. I said, So go home and tell your husband that you were in a Bible study today and that God has convicted you of sin, and repent, and perform oral sex on your husband and tell him that Jesus Christ commands you to do so. The next week the man showed up at church. He came up to me, he said, This is a really good church.

Mike Cospers: Here, as is often the case with Driscoll's teaching, you have to cut through the context a bit and think about what's happening. Yes, people are laughing. Driscoll is a good storyteller. But the story itself is about a pastor compelling a woman, literally in the name of Jesus, to perform a sex act that she's never been comfortable with on her husband. Beyond what's troublesome in the story itself are the underlying assumptions it reveals.

🐦 @R_Denhollander

Rachel Denhollander: And when you began to defining sexuality as a man's physical release, it shouldn't come as any surprise to us that our teaching on sexuality and purity then begins to center completely around the male viewpoint.

Mike Cospers: This is Rachel Denhollander. Rachel is an attorney and an advocate for abuse survivors, who also works as a consultant to help organizations respond to crises in a trauma-informed way. She became widely known back in 2016 when she was the first woman to come forward to pursue criminal charges against Larry Nassar, the USA Gymnastics team doctor. Eventually, more than 300 women would follow in her footsteps. Part of her work has included highlighting the ways evangelical churches – community she is a part of - have failed to protect women, respond well to abuse, and created a toxic culture around sexuality. Like Jessica Johnson, she sees the sexual culture at Mars Hill as pornographic.

Rachel Denhollander: A pornographic mindset is one that looks at women first and

foremost as sexual objects that exist for men's sexual gratification. That's at the heart of pornography. But when we as evangelicals teach sexuality in a way that defines women by these same characteristics as being created to fulfill men's sexual desires, and teaches, quote, unquote, modesty and purity in a way that a woman is seen either first and foremost as a means to a sexual end, or a potential danger and object of temptation, what we have really done is distilled the woman down to a sexual object.

Mike Cospers: I think this idea is so important to hold in our minds. That in a culture like this, women are either a means to an end or a threat. In an article for the Atlantic titled "The flaw in Purity Culture, Angie Hong described it by saying, We are either temptresses or radiant queens. You might add to that, any pastor's version of smoking hot wife. Viewing other women as a threat is also a consistent theme in Driscoll's preaching.

Mark Driscoll: Some women... Ladies, let's talk about this. Don't raise your hand, but how many of you women love attention? All of you. How many? And don't throw a fit because you proved my point. And how many of you... how many of you love to be just a little flirtatious with a man? You love to look him in the eye, flirt with him a little bit.

Mike Cospers: The topic of this sermon is Potiphar's wife, her attempts to seduce Joseph, and then her false allegation of assault when he refuses. It's a go-to story for a lot of leaders who want to tamp down accusations of impropriety, and it's obvious why. As one Jewish scholar put it, one of the oldest recorded sins in the world is a false allegation of sexual assault. But what often gets lost is the power differential in the story. Potiphar's wife sits beside her husband in a wealthy and influential household, and Joseph's a slave. The allegation destroys Joseph's life so quickly because he has no power, no means of defending his reputation. But that gets lost in much of the modern application, when the story is brought out to defend leaders from accusations of assault. And it's lost in the Driscoll story too. In his case, the women in the illustrations he shares, present a spiritual threat to him as a leader, and their seduction as an attempt to subvert his spiritual authority and destroy his ministry.

Mark Driscoll: Wicked. Wicked, evil. We live in a culture that that the women are as brazen and as dirty as the men, just like Potiphar's wife. There are women who dress provocatively, who flirt, who initiate, who kiss the man, who want to take them to bed, who are very, very, very aggressive in word and deed. You know how sick this culture is? I'll tell you. I had this weird experience. It's actually happened a few times in the history of the church. Serving communion in this church, I've had women put propositions in my pocket. I'm like 5'9", I'm as hunky as a Wookiee. I can't imagine if I was single in my early twenties and looked like Brad Pitt. But it's so weird that... I've had women literally walk up, put the note in my pocket: Pastor Mark, you look very stressed out, why don't you come over to my house for dinner, I'll take good care of you, here's my number; it could just be between you and me.

Mike Cospers: In this same sermon, he tells another story of a woman who propositioned him while giving him one of those airport neck massages. And stories like this get told all the time by pastors, women throwing themselves at them at random moments.

James Dobson tells a story about how early in his marriage, he went for a drive after a

fight with his wife. While headed home, a woman pulled up beside him in her car and smiled at him before pulling down a side street. Dobson says that with those cues, he just knew she was attempting to seduce him. I didn't take the bait, he says.

Stories like this show up elsewhere too, often as warning narratives to pastors. And I'm not suggesting that they're all made up, but I wonder, as in Dobson's case, if sometimes these stories don't reveal more about the one telling them than the woman in question. Meaning, is it more likely that a random woman would pull alongside his car to seduce him with just a smile or that he has a mindset that interprets a smile from a woman as a threat. Between feeling responsible for meeting the needs of their husbands in order to protect them from sin, and walking a tight rope so as to not invite sin from others, women find themselves in an atmosphere charged with sexual anxiety.

Rachel Denhollander: It creates a great deal of shame among females for their bodies for the way that they were created. It creates this perception that it is women who are responsible for men's actions. It can actually create a lot of damage in what would otherwise be healthy relationships with women who have become so conditioned to think that men are essentially uncontrolled sexual beings, that they become afraid of their husbands, even husbands that really do have a biblical view of sexuality, or they become disgusted or repulsed by the sex act because it's been taught to them as something that exists for men only. And that's really animalistic in the way that it's practiced.


Mike Cospers: This was particularly toxic at Mars Hill, where from the pulpit Mark would regularly push the boundaries of what was acceptable, both as a preacher and in bedrooms. Here again, he's talking about a passage from Song of Solomon.

Mark Driscoll: This is the biblical justification for stripping, in marriage only. Put those qualifiers in there. Satan did not invent stripping. It's something that God intends for his daughters to do and his sons to enjoy. How many of you women - I don't need a show of hands - have not stripped enough for your house? Why do men go to strip clubs? They want to see a woman who is comfortable in her body, will take her clothes off. Men are highly visual and men want to see. That's why a wife who won't undress in front of her husband, a wife who wants to make love with the lights off in the darkness, a wife who won't dance in front of her husband. He is not getting the full joy that he desires and maritally deserves.

Mike Cospers: This wasn't a one-off sermon thing. It really permeated the culture of the church. At times, the kind of pornographic detail in the sermons themselves, where he'd read passages from Song of Songs, and translate the metaphors into blunt prose, was just salacious. Add to that scenes like Jessica Johnson described, or what Wendy Alsup describes here.

Wendy Alsup: He wouldn't say, quote, unquote, Grace is my porn star, but he would talk about her wearing black leather pants, to them going out to eat, and how hot his wife was. And he would sometimes say this kind of thing from the pulpit. And wear clear heels and have a stripper pole, or these kind of clear porn allusions to married sex. It created an environment in which the norm...Like you just thought that that's what you were supposed to do is fulfill your husband's fantasies. There was just a lot of pressure.

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 @WendyAlsup

And it was just such a good day when I finally realized I can't bear that weight.

Mike Cosper: There seem to be two common threads that resulted from this pressure. In the moment, for most people, it was a measure of shame. And then later, looking back now, so many people I've talked to talk with a spirit of regret about what they were a part of at the time.

Here's Jen Smith.



Jen Smidt: For example, the Real Marriage series where Mark and Grace – and Grace at that point gets very involved - and they're describing, saying from stage, how frequently you should have sex and how free the woman should be with her body. And it didn't feel compassionate, it didn't feel healthy. It felt very cookie cutter in a way that just heaped more shame upon those that didn't have that same story or match that paradigm. And again, at the time, I didn't see it for what it is today. I didn't see that women were so disgraced, and I participated in that.

Mike Cosper: For many Mars Hill leaders, the years since the close of the church have offered space to reassess and immerse themselves in different environments. For Jen, it's been a realization of how profoundly her shame was driving her to try to conform to the caricature of femininity, laid out in the church.

Jen Smidt: If you're someone who has a lot of shame or struggle, or even a kind of lack of confidence in who you are as a woman, and you're being told, If you perform these duties, if you give in these ways, you will be okay, then I tried for so long to have that be enough, for that to assuage the shame that I was feeling about my past, about my story. But I didn't understand that I think what is actually biblical and very Christlike is for him to see and know all of my story and pain and shame, and see me in my full glory. But that's not at all what we were taught or what was modeled. It was like, If you do XYZ, it will look like ABC or whatever formula. But it didn't work.

Mike Cosper: For Tim Smith, it's meant serious introspection about what he's responsible for as a pastor at Mars Hill.

Tim Smith: The points at which I asked things of my wife that I shouldn't have, I have parted ways with the scripture, and I need to repent for that. And so does every man and every Bible teacher and every pastor and every elder. And that's a lot of what happened in the midst of all this. I'm glad that I was a part of a church that could speak openly about sexuality; I'm ashamed that we were a church that went beyond scripture with the same kind of authority and the damage that it did to so many women and marriages.

Mike Cosper: Jeff Becker's assessment is even more star.

Jeff Becker: It was a burden to bear the way that they put those gender roles up. And I do a hundred percent believe that they created through the way that Mark talked candidly and openly about sex and about the things that he enjoyed... It created a hundred percent in my mind and I don't care if anybody tries to argue against it. To me, it was a rape culture that was promulgated using Christianity as a means to create one that

women were subservient sexually in a way that is totally evil.

Mike Cospers: An aspect of the story that remains unsettling to me is how much of this stuff was just out in the open. Mark's teaching on sexuality wasn't a secret, including the pressures that it put on women. It was in his sermons and in his books. In *Real Marriage*, in particular, a book whose story we'll dig into later, this framework for sex is written plain as day. In fact, Mark essentially blames Grace for his reputation as an angry man in his early years in ministry, because she wasn't as available to him as he wished she were. The book also goes into sometimes weird and graphic detail about everything from sex toys, to prostate massage. And yet, it's endorsed by the likes of Andy Stanley, Danny Akin, Wayne Grudem and Les Parrott, well-respected and mainstream evangelical voices.

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My point isn't to blame them for the culture at Mars Hill though, but to point out the fact that because Mark checked certain doctrinal boxes, and particularly because he checked boxes about headship and submission related to gender, some of these leaders were willing to overlook what should have raised alarms otherwise. Others didn't overlook those issues and raised their voices, especially in regard to their concerns about women in the church.

 @SarahBessey

Sarah Bessey: When I look back on that time, I think Rachel really got the heart was motivated by compassion.

Mike Cospers: This is Sarah Bessey, author of *Miracles and Other Reasonable Things*, and *Jesus Feminist*. She's also the creator, with Rachel Held Evans, of *Evolving Faith*. We mentioned Rachel in particular on our first episode, and that she passed away suddenly in 2019.

I talked to Sarah about both her experience in responding to Mars Hill, and Rachel's voice, who often wrote about concerns around sexuality and gender related to Driscoll.

Sarah Bessey: She wasn't in it to win against Mark. I know that. Like she cared about the people that he directly and indirectly was hurting. In a lot of ways, we felt like we carried their stories. Our inboxes were full of their emails. We held them in the back room at those church conferences. I remember multiple times when people would approach us with their stories and even their real despair about Mark. And in particular, at the peak of his powers, they felt that Mark in this theology, particularly for women, was winning, that his voice was the loudest, that his influence was only growing in that. He talked about the pile of bodies behind the bus, like that pile of bodies was just not even being acknowledged. And so in a lot of ways, they felt really invisible and expendable. And Rachel just never really lost sight of those people. She was really hopeful too, I think. She genuinely believed that the story of Jesus, that the gospel, would bring life and goodness and beauty to people.

Mike Cospers: Rose Madrid Swetman was a co-pastor at a Vineyard Community Church in Shoreline, back when Mars Hill was in its heyday, and they'd often find ex Mars Hill members come through their doors, exhausted and confused after their time there, especially the women.

 @RoseMadridS

Rose Madrid Swetman: I just remember around the sexual stuff just was heartbreaking.

Because basically their story was, I've been told that I am supposed to sexually satisfy my husband every day if he needs it, and even if I'm not into it, even if I don't want it, even if I don't... And that there's something wrong with me, I'm a sinner, if I ever say no, or I'm not doing that part of my job. Women that literally talked to me about how their elder counseled them to drop out of college because their job was to stay home and have babies, because this is how we're going to actually take over the city. That sort of thing. Like, people would come to us just feeling shame, confused. We loved this place, we got so much life, but we can't do this anymore, because look, we're shells.

Sarah Bessey: It's hard to also step away from the fact that these are people -

Mike Cospers: This is Sarah Bessey again.

Sarah Bessey: - and that there is real stories and real marriages and real children. People who came of age and people who were damaged, people who are even now having to undo and relearn that God loves them, who are having to relearn that they are worthy, that their bodies are good, that their marriages are good. These go down to the very core of who we are. And then of course, like almost everything we think and no one believes about God, it just ripples over into everything that we do in our lives, and has that sort of impact. And so the way that we sow to the whirlwind of patriarchy and celebrity and covering up and excusing spiritual abuse, we are still now reaping the whirlwind of the consequences from that, and the opportunity then becomes, Are you willing to acknowledge the whirlwind and begin to engage with the work, or are you going to pretend that this was a one-off.

Mike Cospers: Part of the heartbreak of the Mars Hill story is that in the aftermath of the church's collapse, as there was a realization of some of the ways it was a toxic influence in people's lives, it's led to the loss of faith. In Rachel Denhollander's work, she's seen that too.

Rachel Denhollander: We do see a lot of people deconstructing their faith because the God that they've been taught is not a righteous god, is not really a holy god, is not a loving or a trustworthy or a safe god. It's not the God of the Bible. And so it should make sense to us that we have so many of this generation deconstructing their faith. They've been given a false gospel and given a false god.

Mike Cospers: When you talk about these stories, something you often hear, including here on this podcast, is that we tolerate toxicity and unhealthy systems because, Look at the fruit. But having immersed in this world, it strikes me as the wrong question completely. We shouldn't ask, Is it worth the fruit, but, Is it worth the damage. Is it worth leaving warning signs uninterrogated? Is it worth ignoring the revolving door of leaders burnt out? Is it worth turning a blind eye to a hypersexualized culture? That's not just a question for church members, it's a question for everyone. From media like us, to publishers, to conferences, to people who endorse books.

In one sense, it's been a long time since the fall of Mars Hill. We've had this pandemic, and then years of political and social turmoil before that. There's deep division in evangelicalism that's appeared, racial tensions throughout America, police shootings, Me Too, Church Too. And we have platforms everywhere online, where people are turning to

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share their stories. It's unlike anything I've seen in my lifetime, and it seems like something is shifting and turning. I think Sarah Bessey described it perfectly.

Sarah Bessey: I have felt for the last couple of years in particular that we have been living like in an apocalypse. Which, granted, I'm from a Pentecostal adjacent charismatic background, so I'm super comfortable with words like that. But I don't even mean it necessarily in the way that we would normally hear words like apocalypse, but in that sense of unveiling the true sense of the Greek word, that what's hidden is being revealed. And so that apocalypse is like this form of revelation. And so these last couple of years, the curtains being pulled back. And so that unveiling, I think that Mars Hill is part of that, the unveiling of what was really going on behind the scenes. This revelation, and this kind of apocalypse, actually ends up being one of God's really great gifts, because then we get to take a minute to say, What created this? How can we educate ourselves, each other, the vulnerable, especially, if it's spiritual abuse and toxic theology, and this kind of bullying. What does it mean to hold powerful people accountable, instead of giving them a free pass, because we're just so busy saying, But look at all the good that they did.

One of my big convictions, I think, that really probably has its roots even, during this season of our life, was that it doesn't matter how right you are or how right you think you are, if you aren't embodying the fruit of the Spirit. There's an invitation to consider who we're listening to, how we speak about people, how we measure success.

And so I think there's a lot to learn from the apocalypse, or these kinds of collapses, if we have the ears to hear and the eyes to see and the hearts to understand all that stuff. You know, the Spirit's saying, The church. And so I think that that's why these are important conversations to stop us from just perpetuating this cycle of building really big, glorious, sexy houses on sand.

Mike Cospers: The story of the gospel is a story of mustard seeds, and pearls, a Savior in a manger, and a crucified King. And these are disruptive images, stories that turn power upside down and reorder the world for justice and healing. Maybe all the turmoil of these years is an apocalypse. Maybe the Temple's tables are turning upside down. And maybe God tears things down to build something healthier and more whole.

Too many women in the church - not just at Mars Hill, but any who live in a world of sexualized and objectifying as our own - have found themselves on the wrong side of an imbalance of power. But the promise of the gospel is that one day, justice will roll like a river, and the dignity that's theirs as image bearers will suffer oppression no more.

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