



# The Bobby Knight Problem

Whether we seek championship banners or church growth, we're all in danger of using the end to justify the means.

## SHOW NOTES

In 2006, Mark Driscoll met with a group of Seattle pastors who were worried about Mars Hill's public witness. Mark had risen to prominence with pugilistic bravado, and local leaders expressed concern that his tone and language about women and, in this particular instance, pastors' wives hurt the perception of the church in their largely unchurched city. Despite their best efforts to connect on common ground, the meeting's leaders counted the event a failure. Remarkable success had isolated Mark from the average person on whom his words fell. His institution had insulated him from critique. The meeting revealed clearly that power protected Mark from accountability.

Your pastor doesn't need outsized fame and acclaim to fall prey to the seduction of power, and neither do you. In this episode of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, host Mike Cospoer looks to the world of sports to illustrate how power corrupts and how, when we abdicate our roles as gatekeepers for one another, absolute power corrupts absolutely. Step onto the basketball courts at Indiana University and behind the pulpit at Mars Hill to see how power becomes a strong drug that justifies abuse, keeps truth from speaking, and distances us from our shared humanity.

## MASTHEAD

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

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**Mike Cospers:** In November, 2006, in Colorado Springs, a pastor found himself at the center of a national controversy. His name was Ted Haggard, and he was the founder of New Life Church, and the current president of the National Association of Evangelicals. A male prostitute had come forward and alleged that Haggard had paid him for sex and used crystal meth with him. The resulting scandal led to Haggard's resignation from the NAE, as well as from his pastorate at New Life Church. As the controversy buzzed and dozens of think pieces were being published online, asking why this sort of thing had to happen, Mark Driscoll took to his blog and shared his perspective. He wrote, Most pastors I know do not have satisfying, free sexual conversations and liberties with their wives. At the risk of being even more widely despised than I currently am, I will lean over the plate and take one for the team on this. It is not uncommon to meet pastor's wives who really let themselves go. They sometimes feel that because their husband is a pastor he's therefore trapped into fidelity, which gives them cause for laziness. A wife who lets herself go and is not sexually available to her husband in the ways that Song of Songs is so frank about is not responsible for her husband's sin, but she may not be helping him either.

This is fairly consistent with much of Mark's teaching on sexuality at Mars Hill, both before and after these events. And he's hardly the only pastor to have said such a thing. Just this past February, Stewart-Allen Clark, who was at the time the moderator of the general Baptist Council of Associated Churches, said something similar in a sermon that went viral immediately afterwards.

**Stewart-Allen Clark:** Why is it so many times that women, after they get married, let themselves go. Now look, I'm not saying every woman can be the epic trophy wife of all time, like Melania Trump.

**Mike Cospers:** Comments like this are legion, though most are more subtle than these. Clark faced an uproar that led to stepping down as moderator and taking a leave of absence from his church. Driscoll faced an uproar as well. His comments about Haggard came shortly after another blog post in which he criticized the Episcopal Church for naming Katharine Jefferts Schori as their Bishop a few months earlier. In that post he wrote, If Christian males do not man up soon, the Episcopalians may vote a fluffy baby bunny rabbit as their next Bishop to lead God's men.

 @RoseMadridS

**Rose Madrid Swetman:** That was kind of it for me.

**Mike Cospers:** This is Rose Madrid Swetman. Today, she's the regional leader for the Northwest region of the Vineyard USA. But before that, and in the midst of this story, she and her husband, Rich, were the pastors and founders of Vineyard Community Church in Shoreline, a Seattle neighborhood.

**Rose Madrid Swetman:** I just think that for me and for our church and our leadership, things kept bubbling up and bubbling up and bubbling up.

**Mike Cospers:** Among those concerns were issues raised by young couples who'd been part of Mars Hill and came to the Vineyard when they felt displaced or felt like the council they were getting was no longer working.



**Rose Madrid Swetman:** I remember one couple came and they were really in a bad place, so my husband and I met with them over and over again. Then I started meeting with the female by myself, and started hearing the stories of what their premarital counseling was like, how the elder... Basically, they all had to tell every sexual encounter. I just listened to these stories and then when she and her husband had some sort of difficulty, the way she was treated as a woman... Like basically her agency was absolutely wiped out and she was a mess. So she was getting into counseling, I was meeting with her, they were coming for a while, and then they met with my husband and I to say, We so appreciate the two of you, we like what's happening, except we just can't be in a church that has a woman pastor. It was just that entrenched in them that they had to leave. So when those blog posts came out, I just... Paul... That's when Paul started organizing a protest.

**Paul Chapman:** I was like, it's time for somebody to do something here, to stand up and confront him.

**Mike Cosper:** This is Paul Chapman. His wife was a pastor in Seattle, and Paul had been aware of Mars Hill and concerned about its influence for a while.

**Paul Chapman:** And so I and Jim Henderson kicked up this idea of doing a protest at his church.

**Mike Cosper:** Jim Henderson was another pastor in the city.

**Paul Chapman:** Physically confront him in a way that he and his church members wouldn't be able to just shake off.

5 MIN

**Rose Madrid Swetman:** I had a couple of young pastors out of state email me and say, Rose, you're a pastor in the city, we can't just start protesting people's churches on Sunday morning, there must be another way. And so I told them, I'm gonna think about that and I don't know. There's nothing I can do, I have a little church, I don't have a big megachurch. And so I just ended up writing this blog post, an open letter. And in it it basically said, You identify as a street fighter, I identify as a peacemaker, and just went through it and asked him if he would come to the table.

**Mike Cosper:** In addition to that open letter, Rose sent a private letter to the Mars Hill elders coauthored with another Seattle pastor, Dwight Friesen. That letter makes it clear. They didn't want to debate over theology and they didn't want to try to convince Mark to change his beliefs, but they did want to challenge him to better embody Christlikeness in their relationships and in the way they communicated about difference.

**Rose Madrid Swetman:** The next thing I knew, I got a call from Ed Cook who was at the time the pastor of the Seattle Vineyard. And what Ed told me is that Mark contacted him and wanted to know about me, like was it safe for him to meet with me? Like he wanted a background, is she gonna just then go off on the blog and say... So anyway, Ed said, I trust her. And so then a couple days later, I got an email from Mark saying he would meet with the criteria. So there was like, I will meet but I don't want anything on the blog until after the meeting, for safety reasons, this is who I won't meet with... I can't remember, there was all this criteria.

**Mike Cospers:** What happened at that meeting gives us some insight into the bigger questions we've been asking and moving towards throughout this series. Because underneath all these issues, the way the church is governed, the way spiritual authority was understood, and in this case, both how women are viewed and how we account for our public witness, underneath it all is a question about power. How it evolves, how it grows, how it centralizes or decentralizes, the things it does to us and the things we do to protect it.

There's a danger in hearing this story and thinking it's about somebody else. As we've tried to point out along the way, the things that draw us into communities and relationships are complex, as are the things that make us stay. There's also a danger in looking at Mark Driscoll in the same way as someone else, someone unlike us in every way. But what happens to us when we're in a corner, when it feels like something important might be slipping away from us. Perhaps more importantly, what happens to us when the wind is at our back and it's triumph after triumph, when a whole lot of people can point to us as the reason for their own success and as a source of purpose and belonging, when that same group of people begins to count on us for the future as well. What happens to us when we succeed? It's one thing to face the darkness that comes with loss and failure. But there's a whole nother darkness waiting for us when we win.

From Christianity Today, this is 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. Today, Episode Nine, the Bobby Knight Problem.

The meeting Rose Swetman and Dwight Friesen requested took place at the offices of Nancy Murphy, a counselor whose work included domestic violence victims. With them came Rose's husband, Rich, Nancy's husband, Tom, Paul Chapman, and Sandy Brown, the executive director of the World Council of Churches in Seattle. With Mark was Lief Moi, one of the co-founders of Mars Hill, who was still serving as an elder in 2006. It took a while as they began to even come to terms with what the conversation was really about.

**Rose Madrid Swetman:** We kept trying over and over again in that meeting, all of us, to say... Because he kept wanting it to be about our difference around male headship. And we all kept saying, Yeah, we have difference, we all can say that, but that's not what this is about. But he kept wanting to bring it back there. So Paul was trying to say, this is about how you're perceived in the city and how the words you use hurt women.

**Mike Cospers:** His response to those concerns was to pivot the conversation and focus on the successes of Mars Hill.

**Paul Chapman:** He talked about how the Episcopalians are hemorrhaging, their...

**Rose Madrid Swetman:** Denomination.

**Paul Chapman:** ...denomination, as a contrast to how fast his church was growing and the influence he was having across the country. Like, I've got 5,000, five and a half thousand people in my congregation listening to my sermons, and then we put the sermons online, and 45-50,000 people then listen to my sermons. But then at the same time, right after that, he'll say, I didn't realize the influence I was having with people. And he talked about, What I'm learning just now is that I've got these two congregations. I've got my congregation on Sunday morning who listens to me preach and I've got...

**Rose Madrid Swetman:** And they get me. And they get me.

**Paul Chapman:** Yeah. And they get me, they understand where I'm coming from, they understand the context in which my comments are being made. And then I have this online, this public congregation, who I need to do a better job with pastoring.

**Rose Madrid Swetman:** That was pretty mind boggling for me because you could just hear it. And it happened more than once.

**Paul Chapman:** Yeah, it was like four or five times.

**Rose Madrid Swetman:** Yeah. Where he would deny that he had any understanding that those words would be hurting people, because women in his church, it didn't hurt them. I mean really, that was the argument he was making is like, Oh my women get it. Like, Rose, if you and a hundred women behind you are offended, gosh, I didn't even know that.

**Mike Cosper:** As Paul and Rose describe it, there was a kind of oscillation that took place, as though a door were opening to some kind of shared understanding, and then slamming shut with defensiveness.

**Rose Madrid Swetman:** I said something about, Mark, really, like when you call women bunny rabbits, or I said, If it hurts me or a hundred other women behind me, does that matter to you? And Mark says, It does, but then you being a pastor hurts me, and I don't know how to reconcile these disagreements.

**Mike Cosper:** In spite of those comments, the other pastors in the room kept pressing Mark to see the impact of his words, regardless of his theology, and consider how the tone of condescension and misogyny, as well as the shaming that came along with his comments about pastor's wives were causing pain and hurting the church's witness in the city. They pled with him to apologize.

**Rose Madrid Swetman:** The whole meeting felt to me like this juxtaposition of him being a victim, not understanding, then to, I'm so important.

**Paul Chapman:** Lief said, I cannot let Mark apologize because an apology for this could be misconstrued. There's a potential for being understood as an apology for his theology. And a number of us said, you're a gifted writer, a gifted speaker, we're confident that you can write an apology that makes it clear that what you're apologizing for is the language and tone, and the hurt that that language and tone is causing, rather than

the cores of your theological beliefs. But despite that, Mark refused to actually issue anything resembling a real apology, and Lief would not let him do it.

**Mike Cospers:** This is a critical piece of the story, that in the aftermath of a blog post from Mark that was at a minimum a callous blunder, and perhaps cruel and misogynistic, the response of Lief Moi was to protect him, to stand in the gap, so to speak, and block him from these appeals to apologize. We saw something similar in an earlier episode, but it's worth revisiting here. It was actually later in the timeline when Paul Petry and Bent Meyer were fired, and the church worked to quell an uproar from members who were raising concerns. As we noted then, much of the church's communication during that turmoil leaned on their attendance and growth numbers as evidence of God's hand on the church, and more subtly, his blessing on the leaders. And if numbers were your primary metric, then the results were clear. Mars Hill was experiencing remarkable success, and the elders during that season and Lief Moi in this meeting, were determined not to show any cracks in loyalty or unity in the face of opposition. Bend, but don't break. Nod to the conflict, maybe even lament it, but don't give it enough credence to demand action or change.

There are probably a lot of reasons this happens, but I think chief among them is that we want a sort of hero, someone whose ideas and successes are bold and iconic enough to inspire and shape our own. For many at Mars Hill, Mark Driscoll was just such a hero, and it's a role he cultivated through his storytelling about the identity and mission of the church. And it's a role that's easy to inhabit for leaders of all stripes. We want to cast ourselves as heroes because in the language and imagery of the Bible, the people want a king. It's a desire we see in First Samuel, and one that God tries to warn us away from in First Samuel Chapter 8, describing a litany of ways their king will ultimately oppress them. There are celebrations of good kings later, in the Psalms, for instance, or in David's final words in Second Samuel 23, where he likens a good ruler to the light at sunrise, or sun after the rain.

15 MIN

But the power that comes with being a king is a strong drug, one that can attract those who'd abuse it, and corrupt the well-intentioned. It's a visible pattern throughout our world, in the church, in politics, in entertainment, and yes, in basketball. We'll be right back.

**Mike Cospers:** When I was a kid, our family moved to New Albany, Indiana, just across the river from Louisville. I can remember vividly touring houses as we tried to sort out where we'd live, and realtor after realtor told us two things. First, most people who lived on the Indiana side of the river rarely ventured over to Kentucky. Second, the official religion of Indiana was basketball. Both of these proved to be true, especially the latter. Most of the time, movies exaggerate life to make them more interesting. But the movie *Hoosiers* is almost a too subtle depiction of the world of high school basketball in Indiana.

If you go to the New Albany High School gym on a Friday night, you'll usually find it packed wall to wall with people. You'll meet women in their eighties who lament a bad call in a game against Jennings County in 1966. You'll hear the names of up and coming players that are showing promise, that are sixth graders. Most people remember Edwin Hubble as a groundbreaking scientist whose achievements led NASA to name their

most famous satellite telescope after him. At New Albany, though, he's remembered as the coach who took the 1913 team all the way to the state championship.

When a game ends against a bitter rival, the refs are rushed out the door by a phalanx lengths of armed sheriffs. This passion isn't just about the game, though. It's about a certain way the game is played. The fans love the flashy plays and the dunks, just like anybody else, but you better play defense. It's part of the tradition in the state, the Indiana way, as some people call it. A sense that there should be an integrity to how it's played, team over player, hustle, selflessness, and self-sacrifice. And in the late 80s, when we moved up there, no one embodied that spirit more than a coach about an hour up the road from us in Bloomington: Bobby Knight.



**Robert Abbot:** Bob Knight was a hard ass coach.

**Mike Cospers:** This is Robert Abbot, a journalist, director, and film producer who's covered IU.

**Robert Abbot:** He was tough to play for. He came from Army, he was the coach at Army, and he very much took a very militaristic teaching style: I am gonna break you down, I'm gonna take who you are and break you down to nothing, and then rebuild you back into the person that I want you to be. Much like a soldier. It's not about you, it's about the team, it's about your platoon, your unit, the mission, et cetera. And so he would break these players down physically, emotionally, mentally, and then build them up into the person that he wanted them to be, the basketball player he wanted them to be. And it worked in the 70s. He had an undefeated team that lost in the tournament, then he had an undefeated team the next year, won his first national championship. He won another national championship in the early 80s, and his final national championship in 1987.

**Mike Cospers:** It's hard to overstate Knight's influence in Indiana. He was a hero because of his success, but also because of the kind of basketball he coached. He gave the state a sense of pride and identity.

**Robert Abbot:** But I talked to Jon Wertheim who grew up in Bloomington. He's a 60 Minutes correspondent now, was with Sports Illustrated. He and I are friends. And he described Indiana, and so did some other people, as like a flyover state. You have New York, you have Chicago, you have LA, you have Miami, and Indiana is one of those states you could fly over that doesn't have this big identity, it doesn't have a prominence, it doesn't stand for any one thing. And what he described to me, which made sense, is that Indiana basketball and Bob Knight was a lot of the state's identity, because he embodied everything that the people of that state value: hard work, teamwork. It's not about you, it's about helping your farmer friend down the street if you need, it's about helping your teammate. And so many people in the state's identity was wrapped up in Indiana basketball, and as a result of that was wrapped up into Bob Knight.

20 MIN

**Mike Cospers:** Luke Recker was the kind of player that Hoosiers loved. He was home-grown from Auburn, Indiana, and was named Mr. Basketball for the state in 1997, as well as being an All American. When he signed with IU, there was a lot of excitement, and there should have been. Even as a freshman, he was a starter, and in just two seasons,



he scored more than 900 points. But in April of 1999, he announced he was leaving the program. It might have been chalked up as just one more transfer in the NCAA, but Recker's exit was the third significant exit from IU in just a few years, the others being Neil Reed and Jason Collier. Robert Abbott was working for CNN, Sports Illustrated at the time, and his boss, Steve Robinson, had a hunch it was worth looking into, so he assigned Abbott to the story.

**Robert Abbot:** I wanted nothing to do with it, to be honest. I walked out of my boss's office and thought to myself, I'm not gonna get anything on this. And it wasn't a big story at all. It was literally, when we discussed it, the initial conversation was about why are kids leaving, and we just assumed that in the 90s there was a huge explosion in AAU basketball. The McDonald's All American game, all of those things started to get televised, and these kids were superstars at the age of 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, until they entered college. So we just thought it was gonna be a story about entitlement - young athlete entitlement, like I'm too big for my britches and I don't wanna listen to a hard ass coach like Bob Knight.

**Mike Cospes:** Here at the beginning, Bobby Knight was getting the benefit of the doubt, and that's what most people would do in these circumstances. He's a living legend and carries the sort of authority that accompanies celebrity, which we've explored on this podcast before.

There's something similar at work when Mark Driscoll and Lief Moi walk into that room in Seattle in 2006. Driscoll already has a kind of celebrity, but in addition to that, he's a pastor, a title that in almost all circumstances tends to incline people favorably towards you. The others in that room are Christian leaders and they wanted Mark to succeed and flourish, albeit in a way that was less chaotic and destructive to the city.

In Knight's case in particular, there's a power differential too. While student athletes had a kind of celebrity, it was nothing compared to the power and influence of Knight, the future Hall of Fame coach who'd put IU on the map. He had strings to pull at the university, the government, the city at large, the NBA and the NCAA that would be hard to quantify. Almost as soon as Robert Abbott got to Bloomington, he could sense that power and influence, and he could sense a current of fear that ran through the players.

**Robert Abbot:** They didn't want to talk to me. Talked to the mother of one player who said, I can't talk to you, my husband is an insurance salesman in the state. Somebody else said, Indiana basketball's like a mafia family. Like, if you speak out against the god-father, which was Knight, they're gonna come after you, full force. And so that's what took me 9, 10, 11, 12 months. I reported it for 18 months, but over those 18 months, people were afraid.

**Mike Cospes:** The breakthrough in the story came when Abbot began asking about Neil Reed. Neil was originally from Indiana as well, playing there his freshman and sophomore years of high school before moving to Louisiana for his junior and senior year. But Indiana never left his heart, and when it came time for college, there was really only one school he wanted to play for. He idolized Knight, and had a love for IU's style of basketball, embodying it himself. You can go back and watch tape of him, it's pretty extraor-

dinary. There may have been better shooters or better athletes on the floor with him at any given moment, but no one ever outworked this kid. He was scrappy, self-sacrificial, regularly throwing himself in harm's way for the sake of the game. And to be sure, he could play too. For three seasons, he played with the Hoosiers before transferring out - a move that ran counter to his lifelong dream of playing at IU. And it was on the heels of having led the Big Ten in free throws.

Robert Abbot found a way into the larger IU story when he started to ask about Neil Reed, and three days into his reporting, he connected with Neil's dad. He was the first one to really talk about what it was like playing for Bobby Knight.

**Robert Abbot:** My notes from that first night became almost identical to the first story that aired about a year later. It took me a year to nail it down.

**Mike Cosper:** Much of that year was spent building trust with Neil, who for all the reasons we've already mentioned, wasn't eager to stick his neck out.

**Robert Abbot:** It took me the better part of ten months to get him on camera. But during those 10 months, I was trying to find out if what he said is true or not. I started slowly piecing the puzzle together that, Yeah, I think he's telling me the truth, and to be honest, I think he's telling me exactly the truth. But no one really wanted to talk about it.

**Mike Cosper:** That Knight was hard on his players would've surprised no one. He was famous for prowling and shouting from the sidelines, screaming at refs, yelling in players' faces. A half baked or stupid question at a post game press conference would result in a profanity-laced tirade.

**Reporter:** Could we please...



**Bobby Knight:** No, I'll handle this the way I want to handle it now that I'm here. You [CENSORED] it up to begin with. Now, just sit there or leave. I don't give a [CENSORED] what you do. Now back to the game.

**Mike Cosper:** In 1985, he famously threw a chair across the court when a call didn't go his way during a game against Purdue. The tape of that incident, which is all on YouTube, is something to behold, something you can't imagine a coach getting away with today.

**Game Announcer:** Look here, look here. Bobby Knight just threw his chair clear across the free throw lane...

25 MIN

**Mike Cosper:** But that would've been expected by his players, admired even, as intense passion for the game. Away from the court, he was lauded because his program was clean. No under the table dealing with players. They got decent grades, they graduated. That sense of integrity on the court, playing a full game, the Indiana way, was something he was passing on in the rest of their lives, and many players said as much. But as Abbot knocked on doors in the late 90s and talked to players, he discovered that the culture behind closed doors was just as bad as it was on the court: angry, violent, dread-inducing.

**Robert Abbot:** They dreaded going to practice. A couple of them said they'd be in class, and they said, You know when you look at the clock all the time, it never moves. Be in class, looking at the clock because that would slow down time, so practice wouldn't come so quickly. They'd keep looking at it and go, Oh, it's 3, oh, it's 3:05, oh, it's 3:07, it's 3:12.

**Mike Cosper:** The source of that dread was systemic, a culture of bullying and domineering that pervaded the program. In the reporting, three specific incidents emerged that exemplified that culture. The first was that Knight had kicked University President Myles Brand out of practice, an act of insubordination and a sign of the real center of power at the school. The second was a scene from a locker room at halftime, when the Hoosiers were losing. Knight had disappeared into one of the stalls, and when he emerged, he had his pants around his ankles and a soiled bundle of toilet paper in his hand, an object lesson in what he thought of their playing. Third, and most significant, was the allegation that he'd grabbed Neil Reed by the throat at a practice and choked him.

Abbot chased these accusations down and kept in conversation with Reed. By the spring of 2000, he felt like he had the story nailed down and Neil was ready to be interviewed. That interview ran on March 14th on the CNN Sports Illustrated Network.

**Robert Abbot:** Indiana pushed back greatly on CNN, Neil Reed, everybody who was in the piece, they kind of tried to destroy them. They tried to destroy me, my credibility, CNN's credibility. And then a month later, I actually got video of Knight choking Neil Reed, which was the biggest allegation in my first story, that proved what we were saying is right.

**Mike Cosper:** Even then, Knight wasn't fired. At least not right away. He was suspended for three games, fined \$30,000, and given a zero tolerance policy regarding inappropriate physical contact with players or students. The university did acknowledge that Knight was guilty of several acts of outrage and violence. But in the words of University President Myles Brand, none of them rose to the level of termination. Included in those acknowledged acts was choking Neil Reed.

The story of Robert Abbot's investigation at IU was the subject of ESPN's documentary, *The Last Days of Knight*. There are a lot more layers than we have time for here, including the drama of getting ahold of the tape, the showdown between CNN and IU, and the saga that followed and led to Knight's firing. But to me, what the documentary revealed most clearly is a 24-year-old athlete who felt burdened to tell his story, even in the face of the institutional power of the university, and the rage of a massive devoted fan base.

The most striking scene in the film comes when we see Neil Reed in the spring of 2000, watching the tape of Knight choking him. You can see it in his face and in his eyes; he's reliving one of the worst moments in his life.

**Robert Abbot:** Neil Reed told me numerous times, he never came to me because he wanted to hurt Indiana or Bob Knight, he just had PTSD and he had it churning inside him and he had to get it out. He had to get his experience out for him to move on in his life. And as difficult as it was, and as hard as it was, and as many slings and arrows that came at him during that time, and he was beaten like a piñata, in the long run, he got

to move on with his life and become a great father and a teacher and a coach that so many kids at his high school looked up and admired him.

**Mike Cospser:** Outside observers will often ask why insiders don't stand up to abusive leaders and bullies, and the answer is because abusers are almost never standing on their own. Knight acted with impunity not simply because he was tolerated by the university, but because they were invested in his status as a legend and an icon for their own brand. This is the Bobby Knight problem. An organization becomes so identified with an individual that they're determined to protect and insulate them, no matter the cost. Because the benefit of that protection, whether it's about money or image or power or mission, is deemed to be more important than the negative impact they might have on other people.

30 MIN

**Robert Abbot:** I was shocked that they weren't listening to what I was saying. He choked a player, and at the time I thought they were, dumb, stupid, something, I don't know. I was just younger and I was naive and I was like, How do they not see this? I knew they were against it and didn't want it to come out, but really it wasn't until I did the film 16 years later, had a lot more perspective as a journalist, just as a man, that I saw how institutional the pushback was. I dealt mainly with Christopher Simpson who was the Vice President, and he just wanted to snuff me out like there was nothing, and it was obvious. At the time, I didn't quite understand it. I was just like, How does he not get this. 16 years later, I go, Oh, I know he got it, it was his job to destroy me, to destroy CNN, and keep the golden goose - Bob Knight - in place.

**Mike Cospser:** Knight was eventually fired, for grabbing a student by the arm when he felt disrespected. And on one level, it was a vindication for Neil Reed for having the courage to come forward. But the mental and emotional cost was enormous. There's another aspect to the tragedy in Neil Reed's life. At just 36 years old, he died of a heart attack, leaving behind his wife and two kids. But as Abbot shows on the documentary, his life had become rich and full. He was a well-loved teacher at a high school, a good dad, a loving husband. And in spite of the heartbreak of his IU experience, he'd made something beautiful of his life.

**Robert Abbot:** Coach Knight had three national championships, Olympic gold medal, was in the Hall of Fame, when Neil Reed came out with his allegations and the other players did. And when he got fired, he lost his job, but he didn't lose any of that other stuff. When Neil Reed left Indiana, he lost everything. His whole being, from six years old on, was to play at Indiana for Bob Knight. So everything, every decision he had made in his life, kind of had come to a dead end. This is what... He once told me, he said, Robert, I don't know what's worse: Never having your dream come true, or having it come true and turn into a nightmare.

 @R\_Denhollander

**Rachel Denhollander:** One, the warning signs of Bobby Knight's abusive behavior, were there right from the beginning.

**Mike Cospser:** This is Rachel Denhollander, whom you heard on an earlier episode. Rachel's an attorney and an advocate for abuse survivors. She became widely known in 2016 when she was the first woman to come forward and pursue criminal charges

against Larry Nassar, the USA gymnastics team doctor.

**Rachel Denhollander:** I remember as a young child watching his behavior with the players and asking my parents as a little girl, Why is this okay? Why is somebody not stopping him? I remember saying to them, If he did that to somebody on the street, that would be illegal. Why is this okay? The warning signs were there, the outright abusive and illegal behavior was there, but nobody wanted to see it, nobody cared enough to see it. In fact, it wasn't just a not wanting to see, it was an intentional turning away, a normalizing of abusive behavior. And we see that dynamic of normalizing abusive behavior over and over and over again, whether it's in the athletic context or the religious context. We normalize behaviors that are abusive.

**Robert Abbot:** 20 years later, having done so many more stories and films and things like that, it's really the playbook of people in power. I see it plain and simple. I see it, just what you said, Mark taking control of Mars Hill. Harvey Weinstein, it's the Weinstein company. God help you if you cross me, because I'm going to come after you with a vengeance, and I am gonna destroy you. And all you need to do is destroy one or two people, and everybody else looks and goes, I don't wanna be that person next. That fear becomes the greatest moat they can build around themselves. They get seduced by that power, they abuse that power, and then at some point their whole being, everything they do is to stay in power. And when your church is growing from 10 to 20 to 50,000 people, to 12 countries to this, people on the inside are like, Oh wait, we're doing good things.

**Mike Cospers:** There's a threshold that gets crossed in the middle of this, a point where the line between the success and character of an organization and the success and personality of an individual gets blurred, and the two are conflated. As a result, it's hard to imagine IU without Bobby Knight, hard to imagine Mars Hill without Mark Driscoll, hard to imagine Ravi Zacharias Ministries without Ravi Zacharias, and on it goes. The desire to preserve the institution then demands that you protect and support the individual, regardless of the human toll.

35 MIN

**Rachel Denhollander:** It wasn't that they couldn't see, it was that they saw and chose not to care. And that goes down to what we value and prioritize. Then in addition to that, you had a system, an institution that was protecting Bobby Knight, because they had other things that they valued more than people who were made in God's image, than their players. Then you had an entire system that surrounded Bobby Knight, that meant that it was very difficult for any players to speak up. And we see really parallels to this in the church environment. The number of survivors that I have walked with who have spoken out against abusive churches and institutions, and then haven't been able to find a church to attend in their locality because word about their, quote unquote, whistle blowing or, quote unquote, divisive behavior starts being spread amongst the churches, really is not that much different than the basketball players who moved on to different schools or on to different teams and felt that they had to keep their mouth shut or they would be blacklisted from all the other institutions. And what that creates is a ripe environment where abuse not only flourishes, but it's just right out there in the open. And we normalize it and we value something else more.

**Mike Cospers:** The question we find ourselves asking again and again is, Do the ends justify the means? Did the championship banners hanging in Assembly Hall justify Bobby Knight's brutal treatment of players? Did Mars Hill's baptisms justify Driscoll's pugilistic tactics as a pastor provocateur. The answer for Christians seems obvious, that the way in which we do things is as important as the results we get. Our tradition in our scriptures would tell us that it's better to lose, even to lose our lives, than to abandon our principles. At least that's how it's supposed to be. But for much of North America, the expectations we have of our churches is a heightened, hyped experience. People like the sense that their church is a movement, that it's fast and loud and doing great things. And it's worth asking whether those expectations might be the very thing attracting leaders. Kings, if you will, who are in it for the wrong reasons.

Russell Moore, public theologian here at CT, told a story about Harvest Bible Chapel's James MacDonald, who was removed from leadership under similar accusations of bullying and domineering. It gets at this core question.

 @drmoore

**Russell Moore:** When I was at Southern Seminary, James MacDonald preached in chapel once and was at a lunch where several of us were. And I remember him saying, People will savage you for the very strengths that they depended on for you to get there. There's a part of that that's true, of course. We have to expect no human being is going to have all of the gifting and strength in every area. But maybe there's something wrong with the kinds of strengths we depend on to get there. Maybe there's something wrong with the there. I think James MacDonald was right in one respect, that the strengths that meet the people's expectations, these strengths were often what bring about the - in his case, he was saying criticism, ultimately downfall - of people. But the problem is the expectation of what it is that we are getting from a church. Which means if we expect a congregation to be big enough, and I don't mean in terms of membership, but big enough in terms of meeting the sorts of expectations that American evangelicals have of a church, then often the people who believe that they can do it, and the people who can withstand what it takes to get there, are often the unhealthiest people. That is a clear fact about American evangelical life. Just look around and we can see it.

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

There's one more critical piece to the Bobby Knight problem. It involves doors with locks and chains.

**Robert Abbot:** Famously, there'd be a chain and a lock on the doors to go into practice so nobody could go in there. So he was Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. And he'd show you a little bit in the public, but when he went behind the scenes, he was a different guy. The question the fans should ask is if Coach Knight, if Driscoll, will do that in a public setting in front of a microphone, and they have the audacity, the balls, whatever, imagine what they're gonna do behind closed doors when no one's watching.

**Mike Cospers:** For a system like this to work, you have to have those doors and chains. Meaning you have to have something, whether it's a team of leaders or an institution or literal physical separation, where you only appear on screens, insulating you from the

crowd and from followers. What can happen in our day when the tools of media are so abundant, and when, for instance, the team at Mars Hill was so talented, is that you can create a curated version of yourself, an illusion that embodies that king-like status, where the clips are well-edited and the stories well told. Bobby Knight had those literal doors, but he also had the backing of an institution. For Driscoll, his greatest tool was that media.

🐦 @ahc

**Andy Crouch:** So media means middle; it's from the Latin for middle.

**Mike Cospers:** This is Andy Crouch. He's the author of a number of books, including *Playing God*, a book about redeeming the gift of power. He's also a Partner for Theology and Culture at Praxis, which is an organization advancing redemptive entrepreneurship.

40 MIN

**Andy Crouch:** When you put a device in the middle between people, you distance us from one another, and this is actually the power of media. The more I can control the mediating channel, the less you really know about me. And I can practice at getting so good, whether it's taking 20 selfies and posting one on Instagram or doing three takes of this little bit that might end up on the air and choosing the best one, or just rehearsing offline. The better I get at controlling this medium, the more powerful it becomes to you as the listener in this case, and the more distant I am from you in reality, and the less you see of the fullness of my life.

**Mike Cospers:** Often it's in the interest of an institution to create that mediation. When a person's become an icon, the more you can maintain some distance between them and the audience, the more you can preserve and shape that image. For Knight, his reputation was really about that juxtaposition of the guy who was a roaring lion on the court, and who mentored kids and helped them graduate off of it. It may be that for much of his career, that's who he truly was. But by the time Neil Reed got there, the lion had taken over and IU had to create that mediating structure.

What's interesting to me about the story I've told on this episode about Mark Driscoll is that it feels a little bit like a crack in the door. Mark's willingness to meet with these pastors and leaders from different theological traditions, something that was uncharacteristic for him, feels like a moment of vulnerability in the midst of the Mars Hill story. But you also see the instinct in Lief Moi to protect, and that phenomenon would echo again a year later when the elders formed ranks after the firing of Paul Petry and Bent Meyer. That pattern would repeat itself in the years to come, as other accusations came forward from former elders and staff. You'd also see the use of media extending further and further into the life of the church, more layers of production that were also layers of insulation. And you'd see Mark move away from the other staff physically, moving his offices and his house.

🐦 @jessebryan

**Jesse Bryan:** And I'll tell you this right now, everybody can sit around and like point at Mars, but straight up, the system has not changed.

**Mike Cospers:** This is Jesse Bryan, who served as Mars Hill's creative director for many years. He was responsible for developing much of their media.

**Jesse Bryan:** The end lust for audience is still the same. Name a big church right now that doesn't understand media. Do you know any pastors now who aren't podcasting, because they're not sure that what they're putting in the world is good for the world? I don't know any. My understanding in talking to a friend of mine that's still involved in church, is that the hardest person to hire for right now in the church is the media person. In fact, they're even firing their youth staff so they can afford to have a media team. What does that tell you? Do you care more about the person in front of you or the person on the other side of the speaker? How has it changed? I don't know, I'm not involved at all, but I'm just saying, I'm friends with a lot of those dudes and I know that they know all the dangers of these things and every one of them still hits send after the sermon on Sunday. That's the machine.

**Mike Cosper:** Jesse comes to these conclusions, having been burned by the system, and having watched many friends suffer in the aftermath. Interestingly, Andy Crouch comes to the same conversation as an outsider to this world, observing it culturally and theologically. They arrive in a similar place.

**Andy Crouch:** We know that the way we're formed is by proximate inescapable encounter with another person who deeply loves us, who's willing to let us be vulnerable in their presence, who is themselves willing to be vulnerable in our presence, and who calls us to a kind of renovated life. That's the way anybody changes.

**Mike Cosper:** I think we fail to see the way that media has become a barrier to community. That there's a deep and tragic loss of connection between human beings in our world, and that the church's unapologetic and unexamined embrace of these mediated ways of connecting have made it complicit in creating an isolated, lonely culture. That very phenomenon makes us vulnerable to church cultures that offer illusory experiences of transcendence through production and hype, and it sets us up to follow predatory leaders because their grandiose promises speak to our deep unmet desire for belonging and purpose. When that leader falls or disappoints us, the curtain drops and we lose our grip on the sense of identity we've developed through that mediated connection.

**Andy Crouch:** What it's rooted in, Mike, is it is so hard to believe that the word and the Spirit are enough. It really feels like we need something extra. Like we are up against Caesar here, we are up against Kim Kardashian. Like let's get just a little extra mojo here, whether it's that little edge of humor that is not ultimately honoring of people, or that crazy performance that gets people's attention, or that really slick production. Yes, of course it's about the word and the Spirit, but those feel awfully weak. All of us, the temptation is so deep to go for that little extra.

45 MIN

**Mike Cosper:** And there's often an incremental way that that little bit of extra, whether taken on experimentally, intentionally, or thoughtlessly, can become an inch by inch transformation into dependence on spectacle and hype in our churches.

**Andy Crouch:** Through this whole story of the rise of the megachurch, there's this incredible alternative being offered in the writing and the life of this guy, Eugene Peterson, who then happens to perform a kind of act of media sort of brilliance by doing The Message thing, translating, writing - I don't know what he did - then he becomes pow-



erful, right, in a worldly sense. Everyone's like, Ooh, Eugene Peterson. But his life mattered long before *The Message*. His life would matter if *The Message* had never been produced and sold the way it did. There was a witness, like right there in our world. Teresa of Calcutta, right? Not a perfect person, sometimes a little harsh with people that she had power over, but nonetheless like a witness. I think about the fact that Teresa and Diana died in the same week. They are like these mirror images of what we want to be as a human being. The two most recognized, visible women in the world, it was said, at the time. But utterly different paths to celebrity, utterly different paths to influence. And of course, one of the things I said in my book, *Culture Making*, about them is that it's fascinating that almost everybody wanted to be like Diana, but nobody can be like Diana. Like, only one person gets to marry the Prince of Wales. And most of us are not beautiful like Diana. Like, we've got no shot, zero. Meanwhile, you have Teresa of Calcutta, and anyone could be like her. Because all she is is a saint, and anyone can be a saint if they open themselves up to Jesus. We have not lacked for models of godly power, we just don't want the suffering that comes with it, the long stretches of anonymity and seeming ineffectiveness, the humiliation of being like your Lord. That part we would really rather not have. There have been other options offered, mediated options. But the way of Eugene Peterson, the way of Theresa, is right there. Any day, I can wake up and say, I'm heading on that road. Whereas if I look at some celebrity and try to imagine how I'd get to where they are, I've got no chance. And yet, every day I'm tempted to divert into some facsimile of the path of celebrity, rather than the path of sainthood.

**Mike Cospers:** Rose Swetman called for her meeting with Mark Driscoll as an attempt to reach him, to appeal on the level of compassion and vulnerability. And that's what repentance always demands - the risk of admitting that we've done something wrong, that we've hurt another person. The conversation, though, ended up being a kind of dizzying back and forth, from some acknowledgement that he'd wounded others to self protection, to arguing about theology, to describing how he felt persecuted and unsafe because of his prominence in the city. Rose, Paul, and the others wanted to honor some measure of the progress, even if it was just his willingness to come to the table.

**Rose Madrid Swetman:** I think by the time we ended that meeting, we were trying to get to, Paul, what do you need to call off the protest. When we started coming down from just going around in circles with him about his words. And at that point he was saying, I don't really care if you protest or not, that's not why I'm here, I'm here to hear from my critics.

**Paul Chapman:** He never apologized. He did say things in the meeting that was movement, showed some growth even maybe about what the impact of his role is and his words within not only his church, but within the larger church in the US. But there was never an apology. So the PR here was, I wanted to accuse Mark of apologizing. I wanted to dare him to deny that he said that he was sorry for the things he said. That kind of puts him into a corner where he can't really deny it and come out looking good.

**Mike Cospers:** Mark wrote a blog post a few days after the meeting titled, *Count It All Joy*, in which he recounted aspects of the meeting and the lessons learned. In it, he acknowledged his youth and that he needed to be more cautious with his words. He also expressed a longing for this larger platform to have come later in his ministry when

he was in his fifties or sixties, but he hoped to mature in the role. Paul Chapman called off the protest, and in comments to the *Seattle Times*, he said, We believe we have a meaningful and sincere apology for the inflammatory remarks he's made, he's pledged to change his language and tone without giving up his theological convictions, which is fine. Looking back, Paul sees Mark's language in the meeting and in the blog post as half-hearted at best, something equivalent to a politician's statement that mistakes were made. In the actual language of the blog post, he never directly takes responsibility, but points to how people experienced him, how his words were received, what others' perception was, and how people felt.

I asked Paul about the tension here between his public acceptance of an apology in 2006, and his reflections now. While he remains glad that he diffused the protest, he regrets on some level that they backed down.

**Paul Chapman:** Nobody to my knowledge had gotten Mark from outside the church, oppositionally had gotten Mark to come to the table. We could have gotten the churches of Seattle to say, Wait, no more here, this is not what we want to present to the city. That was an inflection point in a time in history, and we let that moment pass. We brought the olive branch and cheap grace, and that allowed the systemic injustice to continue for years in Seattle and Mars Hill. I think that's the tragedy of this. Individually, collectively, we blew it.

**Mike Cosper:** Many people that I've talked to have expressed a burden like this, especially those in Seattle. The spiritual and emotional fallout in the city echoes even now, seven years later, and there are some who were part of that story at various levels, even at a distance as Paul was, who wish they'd done or said more earlier. In the end though, I'm not sure they could have. There's a calculus that was made, and it shaped Mark's decisions for the years to come.

And I think there's a parallel to it in an anecdote from Bobby Knight's story. It's in John Feinstein's book, *Season on the Brink*, written about the 1985-86 season when Knight let Feinstein shadow the team. Near the end of the book, Feinstein recalls this moment that encapsulates that calculus, the one Knight made, and in the end, the one Driscoll made. It's what justified the culture of fear, the bullying, the unhinged brashness. Feinstein writes, After the Indiana/Illinois game, during which Bob kicked and slammed a chair, and kicked a cheerleader's megaphone, Dave Kindred, the superb columnist for the *Atlanta Constitution*, wrote that he was disappointed to see Knight acting this way again. Kindred, a long time friend of Knight's, ended the column by writing, Once again, I find myself wondering when it comes to Bob Knight, if the end justifies the means. A few days later, Knight called Kindred. You needed one more line for that damn column, Knight said, You should have finished by saying, And one more time, I realized that it does.

**Mike Cosper:** Thanks for listening. Subscriptions to CT are one of the best ways to support this kind of journalism. If you want to help us continue the work, consider joining today at [orderct.com/Marshall](http://orderct.com/Marshall).

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60 MIN