



The Tempest

It wasn't one thing that ended Mars Hill. It was one thing after another, after another, after another...

SHOW NOTES

Mars Hill grew dramatically in 2012, and it seemed like nothing could stop the church's ever-widening expansion. Pastor Mark Driscoll's book *Real Marriage* released that January, hit *The New York Times* Best Seller list, and launched a book tour and a series of television appearances that brought him into countless new homes and churches. But in the next two years, the church would experience endless controversy, turn over almost all of their staff, and discover that no efforts at PR or spin could hide the rot of a deeply dysfunctional culture of leadership.

The second-to-last episode of this series is a two-and-a-half-hour look at those final two years, especially between October 2013 and October 2014, to look at exactly what brought down one of America's fastest-growing churches, and how some of the characters whose lives we've followed in this series weathered the turmoil.

MASTHEAD

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

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 @MikeCospers

Mike Cospers: Hey folks, Mike Cospers here, host of the podcast. Just taking a moment to point out, in case you didn't notice when you clicked play, that this is a long one. There are some stories in this episode that we didn't want to split up, and I think when you listen, you'll understand why. We also really felt like this was one coherent story, a cascade of events that was threaded together in ways that didn't feel right to split up.

Mike Cospers: So this is Episode 11. Episode 12, our finale, is scheduled to come out on November 23rd. Thanks again for your patience. And thanks, especially to all from Mars Hill, who've been sharing their stories.

Voiceover: This is CT media.

Mike Cospers: It's July 22nd, 2012, and Mark Driscoll is wrapping up a sermon titled Jesus Preached the Gospel. It's part of a series he's preaching over the summer to help Mars Hill members understand why they do what they do.

 @PastorMark

Mark Driscoll: Jesus fed people, but they didn't crucify him for that. Jesus healed people, but they didn't crucify him for that. Jesus cared for widows, orphans, the poor, the marginalized, the outcast, and the abused, and they didn't kill Him for that. Why did they kill Jesus? Because of His preaching. Because He kept saying things like, I'm God, you're a sinner, I'm here to save you, repent.

Mike Cospers: It's a great example of the kind of preaching he was loved for, especially this first half. But the series as a whole is about orienting people to Mars Hill's mission and ministry. For them, ministry starts at the pulpit, and the model places Driscoll there 90% of the time. So there's actually a moment in this sermon where he sort of gives an apologetic for it and then answers an obvious question.

Mark Driscoll: People ask, What happens if something happens to you. It's always the, What happens if you get hit by a bus. I never get hit by a car, I always get hit by a bus in the question. I guess I'm thick enough, maybe I could handle a car. But the question is always, What if you get hit by a bus. And let me say a few things. Number one, I have no intention of going anywhere, okay. I love Mars Hill and I'll preach at any Mars Hill, and I'm committed to Mars Hill. And my whole prayer goal is the same that it's always been: I would like to be a member of one church my whole life, Mars Hill Church.

Mike Cospers: He outlined several scenarios in which the church could continue and recover if something did happen to him. But he also talks a lot about his good health, his good doctors, and his dedication to this place. The underlying message is clear. The ministry's been built around him and he plans to stay. Here's the conclusion to the sermon:

Mark Driscoll: But hear me on this: Let's make a plan that I live into my eighties. Let's make a plan that the first 15 years were just the first fruits and a good start, because this last year we saw more people baptized, more people meet Jesus, more lives get changed, more people in community groups, more people attend Sunday service than any year in the history of the church. It was our best year ever. The year before that was previously the best year ever. The year before that was previously the best year ever, and

the year before that was previously the best year ever. You know what? It's getting better every year. I love preaching and teaching here, and you are a wonderful people that I praise God for, and I wouldn't trade you for any group I've ever seen on the earth, and I'm honored to teach you every single Sunday. Thank you for letting me do so. I'm very, very, very excited. Thank you.

Mike Cospes: All of this was true. In fact, they'd spent much of the last year adapting and retooling in such a way that they were positioned to expand even faster than before. But as Sociologist of Religion Gerardo Marti points out, this is actually part of the problem for churches like Mars Hill and other famous examples before it. Growth can become so central in identity that it must continue, and the pursuit of growth at all costs creates a brittle structure underneath.

 @praxishabitus

Gerardo Marti: The management of the church leaves you only thinking in terms of how to keep the plate spinning, and it doesn't necessarily think more about rooting. So one of the most interesting things in looking at Robert Schuller's ministries is when you look at Robert H. Schuller, you thought, He's building this campus, he's got this media ministry, you've got more and more buildings. It seems to be so stable. And yet the whole point was you've got to have the next thing in order to keep the whole thing running, and that can't last.

 @TimAndSmith

Tim Smith: Ultimately what I believe led to the death of Mars Hill is that over time we did less and less to slow anything down.

5 MIN

Mike Cospes: This is Tim Smith, who, by then was pastoring Mars Hill Portland.

Tim Smith: The height of it in 2012, the number of churches we planted and the number of people we saw, the number of baptisms that happened at Easter, it was all the high point, and that was the peak of our ambition and the peak of what it felt like growth that we had ever experienced. The distance between what felt like the highest point of the greatest growth, and the end of the church, was less than two years. We sped up so much after that, we removed all barriers to growth, and by the end of 2014, the church was dead.

Gerardo Marti: So who would think that a church that had thousands and thousands of people, all that kind of donations, this huge staff, all this fame, you know, that something like that would seem so fragile. It's because it's really not built on strength; it's built on something else.

Mark Driscoll: I'm not going anywhere, anywhere.

Mike Cospes: From Christianity Today, this is Mike Cospes 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's episode, Episode 11, The Tempest.

If you want to induce cringes from almost any former Mars Hill staff member, there are two words that do it almost right away. Real Marriage.

Mike Cospers: Let's talk Real Marriage. You were there for that.


 @nickbogardus

Nick Bogardus: Damn, do we have time for Real Marriage? This is the stuff that's gonna get me in trouble. Without a doubt.

Mike Cospers: The concept for the book came about with the sense that whatever Driscoll was about to do next was going to be big. He wanted to seize the moment, the growth, the new recognition, the new circles he was traveling in, with a topic that he felt would rattle cages.


Nick Bogardus: So if you remember, he did the Doctrine book and then he did Real Marriage. This is Nick Bogardus. At the time he was Mars Hill's PR and Media Relations director. And after Doctrine, I was talking to him about like, Okay, this is a fantastic book. I still think it's a good book. What do you wanna do next? And he said, All my theology's done, people know where I stand, now I can do what I want. So then he wanted to do Real Marriage, and we were sitting at a marketing meeting with that, and I said, Mark, you need to understand that if you do this, you will always be the sex guy, like, it's a Green Day Dookie. They're just no, like, you know, I mean, it's like the first big thing ends up being kind of the big thing for you. So if you do this, this is what you're always going to be known by, this kind of crass, over-sexualized, whatever. And I was never invited back to a marketing meeting again after that. It was done.

Mike Cospers: When the manuscript was ready and the contents were ready for review, it caused another layer of alarm. Here's Jesse Bryan, Mars Hill's Creative Director.

 @jessebryan

Jesse Bryan: He asked me about it when we were in London. He's like, What'd you think of the book? Because I read it on the flight. And I was like, Dude, you threw Grace under the bus. Like, Dude, that's not how it went down, that's not fair, man. You know? And he didn't talk to me for a day.

Mike Cospers: Brad House was the pastor who was going to be tasked with writing the curriculum based on the book.

 @PBHouse

Brad House: I read the manuscript of that book and I said, This is a mistake, this is an absolute mistake, some of the stuff you have in here, I mean, it's essentially you doing public therapy on stuff that you're not ready to talk about. You should change this. I tried to appeal. This makes you look real bad.

10 MIN

Mike Cospers: Almost everything about Real Marriage was a departure from what Driscoll had done before. From the content, to the branding, to the marketing strategy. And he relied far more on the publisher than he had in the past. The word Real in the branding rubbed a lot of folks the wrong way. As Jesse Bryan put it, As soon as you have to call something real, you know it's fake. But the promise from the publisher was to help Driscoll become more mainstream, to be sort of a next generation America's pastor, an edgier Rick Warren type. The publicity campaign led to appearances on Piers

Morgan, Fox & Friends, Dr. Drew, and The View, where reception was a lot more cold. When it got a negative review, though, it tended to be very negative.

It's no surprise for instance, that Rachel Held Evans, one of Driscoll's longtime critics, put it on blast. But perhaps more surprising was the devastating and detailed review published in the Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, a scholarly journal focused on exploring and developing complementarian theology. In theory, there should have been a lot of theological alignment, but Heath Lambert clocks in almost 5,000 words to unpack the pervasive way Mark heaps all the blame for their marriage's struggles on Grace's sin and past trauma, including his own reputation for anger and rage. Lambert's conclusion isn't, Read with caution, it's a resounding, Do not read. Part of the hostility towards the book and campaign from inside Mars Hill gets at something we talked about in the previous episode, the sense that it wasn't for them in particular, but a broad generalized audience.

The changes that had begun in 2011 were continuing at a steady pace this year, and with it came not just cultural change, but functional change. The church felt and acted like a very different place, especially because of the dramatic contrast between Sutton Turner's management style and Jamie Munson's. Sutton, you may remember was a transplant who joined the staff in 2011 after working in the Middle East as a CEO.

Here's Nate Burke, Mark Driscoll's long-time assistant.

 @jnathanburke

Nate Burke: I think, you know, in the era that Jamie was there and I worked really closely with Jamie and Jesse, and it felt like a few of us, one, I think we had the ability to push back on stuff or say things that a lot of other people might not wanted to have said. But I think aside from that, what you're describing in terms of just going, Look, I know what he said, but here's what he means. You know, leader's intent, let's just slow walk this, he's not gonna remember about it in a week, or whatever it is.

Mike Cospers: In other words, new leaders didn't know the difference between a hot-headed impulse and a real idea. What they knew was how to execute orders, and they did. And the change that caused in the culture at Mars Hill was swift, and reflective in many ways, of Sutton's own temperament. He has the energy of someone who wants to make decisions and pull triggers.

 @suttonturner

Sutton Turner: I remember the first day... I met with the finance team on my very first day and I asked - and this was like April - and I asked for the financials and they said, Yeah, we're just about to close out October for the financials. And this was in April. I mean, I was like, Yeah, we got problems.

Mike Cospers: The sheer number of moving pieces and initiatives that took place in 2011 and early 2012 is kind of mind blowing. Mars Hill launched or relaunched six campuses. They hosted Easter at Qwest Field. They organized a massive year-end giving campaign called God's Work, Our Witness, including a five-hour documentary film. And then there was the Real Marriage campaign.

There had been controversy too. There was some negative reception to the book, in-

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cluding in Acts 29 and other reformed circles. But even more, there was an uproar over Driscoll's participation in an event called the Elephant Room, hosted by James MacDonald. At the first event in 2011, MacDonald invited a collection of megachurch pastors and wanted to sit them down to discuss their theological differences. It was branded as though it were going to be a big conflict, but it wasn't. The second year, at the end of January in 2012, was far more controversial. Not because of what took place on the stage, but who was on it. Specifically, Bishop T.D. Jakes. His invitation stirred controversy because of his association with the prosperity gospel, as well as an understanding of the Trinity that's sometimes referred to as Oneness Pentecostalism, and by critics as modalism, which is considered a denial of the historic understanding of the Trinity. The uproar over MacDonald and Driscoll uncritically sharing the stage with Jakes was tremendous, so much so that MacDonald left The Gospel Coalition over it in January.

Similar pressures were mounting on Driscoll from TGC, as well as Acts 29. It was in the midst of all this that Sutton got a clear picture of the financial situation and wrote out a lengthy email, outlining it to Driscoll and Dave Bruskas. By that time, the three of them made up the executive team and would until the closing of the church. Several things were making the church financially unsustainable, but there was one big issue at the root.

Sutton Turner: I coined it the Hail Mary strategy. So what happened is you charge up a year's worth of expenses, and then November and December, you have to have a year end giving, that is a Hail Mary, to bring the books back to even. And what happened is every single year, the spending was more and more and more, that the Hail Mary became...It's like in football, you can ask a quarterback from, you know, like the 40-yard line, their own 40-yard line, to do a Hail Mary. But if you're on the 25 or the 10, their own 10, you can't throw a Hail Mary pass, you can't throw it that far. Well, that's where the church was getting.

Mike Cosper: In other words, they weren't just dependent on big year-end gifts for their budget. That's not terribly unique for nonprofits. They were growing more dependent on them year over year in a way that was unsustainable. Sutton also identified patterns of reckless spending, and concerns over the way leaders were leveraging the church to build personal platforms.

Several people familiar with the ministries at this time, though, noted that both of these issues had a model in Driscoll himself, and that he'd directed certain staff to build platforms as a way to extend the Mars Hill brand. Nonetheless, this moment was a tipping point and the executive team agreed to empower Sutton to make significant changes to the way money was budgeted and spent. Those would be felt down the line in the years to come.

That same month, the controversy with MacDonald and the Elephant Room grew noisy enough that Driscoll decided to resign from The Gospel Coalition as well, and in bigger news than that, hand over the keys of Acts 29 to Matt Chandler. One could read those circumstances as Driscoll backing down and caving to pressure. But I actually think that it was in line with the reorganization that was happening at Mars Hill at the time, that they were narrowing their focus on growing the church and pushing towards their

ultimate goal of 50 locations and 50,000 people.

Sutton's one-year anniversary on the staff was shortly after all of this.

Sutton Turner: Mark comes in to my review and Dave and I got a shovel from Mark. A shovel that Mark put Proverbs 14:4, which says, Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but the abundance of crops come by the strength of the ox. Basically meaning that I'm gonna have to walk around behind Mark and clean up his poop, to put it nicely. And so that was, I mean, like, that's my anniversary.

Mike Cosper: Sutton also coordinated a shift in the bylaws at this time. The governing board of the church was made up of staff members, all of whom reported to Mark in some way, and who had very little incentive to hold him accountable.

Sutton Turner: Everybody that's on that board looks at Mark as a spiritual father, agrees with everything that Mark is doing, and so there's no accountability. So I'm starting to try to figure out, Okay, so who will Mark be... And I asked the question. So Mark, you know, who would you be accountable to? And I'm thinking Piper, I'm thinking Tim Keller, I'm thinking just the top... You know, the people across the country that maybe Mark would listen to. And he says to me, I'm not going to be accountable to anybody with a smaller church. And man, you know what, looking back on that, I should have realized, Wait a minute, Mark's the problem. The board governance is not the problem, Mark's the problem. But I didn't.

Mike Cosper: The board that was installed included a couple of well-respected business leaders from the church. Larry Osborne, pastor of North Coast Church, and James MacDonald. When that was all said and done, the new board distributed another round of symbolic gifts and they were prophetic for the years to come.

Sutton Turner: I get a hard hat because I'm, what they tell me: You've got a really hard job and you're gonna need this. And then they give Mark a lunchpail, and that lunchpail, Michael Van Skaik says - who's the chairman - says, This needs to be the last lunch you pack, Mark.

Mike Cosper: Maybe this colloquialism is a little more familiar to some of you than it was to me, but to pack somebody's lunch is basically to dress them down, to get in their face, to yell at them and humiliate them.

Sutton Turner: Mark actually signed it for me and gave me the lunchpail, because I'm going to pack everybody's lunch. And then Dave gets a bullhorn, like the ones that firemen use, and the board tells, Dave, You need to get a voice, meaning Mark needs to no longer be the guy telling bad things to people, you need to be the guy telling the... having the hard conversation.

Mike Cosper: In some ways, this whole thing is telling because it's clear they wanted to insulate Mark from conflict. So make Sutton the hatchet man, make Dave the one that goes and has hard conversations, and keep Driscoll at a distance when you can. All this change was destabilizing the organization though. For Jen Smidt, that meant watch-

20 MIN

ing a steady stream of friends leaving and a rising anxiety about her and Phil's place in the church.



Jen Smidt: Spring of 2012, multiple people that... Pastors and families that we knew and loved and respected, just one after the other, people were getting fired or leaving, and it just was a very unsettling time.

Mike Cosper: At a dinner before a members' meeting that spring, Jen decided to introduce herself to Sutton. Even though he'd been there a year, they hadn't met, and such is life at a multisite.

Jen Smidt: He and I talked a bit and he kind of shared a little vulnerable tidbit about his family and his story, so I was like, Oh, well, I guess I'll go there. I said, Well, you know, I'm glad to meet you, this has been a hard year, Phil and I have been at Mars Hill for a long time and seeing all of the changes are really, really concerning to me. And I said, Frankly, I believe and know that I'm continuing to see a difference between Mars Hill the church, and Mars Hill the business, and Mars Hill the business may not need men like my husband, but Mars Hill Church certainly does. And that was really the end of the conversation. It was a five-minute conversation. I left feeling like just electric with nervous energy, and kind of proud of myself that I had dared speak something true like that. And I told one of my friends and she was utterly mortified because she knew what it would mean.

Mike Cosper: Phil got a call the next morning and was told his wife was grasping for power and that he needed to get his home in order. At the time, Jen was a regular contributor to the blog, and one of their more widely-read authors, but a women's ministry leader showed up at her house to meet with her and let her know that the executive elders felt she needed a break from that ministry, that it had become an idol. For much of the next year, she felt ostracized, but Phil's ministry continued and even flourished.

One day in the midst of all of this, she saw Mark alone and approached him.

Jen Smidt: I just teared up and said, Mark, this has been a really hard season, I am so sorry for what happened with Sutton, I really love you and care about you and I'm sorry.

Mike Cosper: Mark called Phil later that day and said he was worried about Jen, that she seemed unstable and maybe needed a psych eval, and that he'd pay for it so long as Phil never told Jen.

Jen Smidt: And so he didn't for four months, and I was really kind of floundering and left out to dry with, like, I was stripped of what it felt like. In my marriage I felt alone, in my community I felt alone. And I really just started to question, like, What did I really do wrong?

Mike Cosper: Nine months passed, and she remained out in the cold and heard nothing. And then with no explanation, she was invited to start writing for the website again. So she responded by asking to meet with Dave Bruskas and with Mark, since word had come down from the executive team to remove her from ministry in the first place.

She didn't ask to meet with Sutton since they didn't have any relationship aside from the one conversation that started all of this. She wanted to sit with them and let them know how deeply the experience had wounded her. Dave Bruskas apologized and went so far as acknowledging that he didn't even remember it happening, which was a hurtful thing to hear in itself. When she and Phil met with Mark, it was an entirely different experience.

Jen Smidt: He spent the whole time making eye contact only with Phil, and at one point said to Phil, I reserve the right to speak only to heads of households. So again would not even give me the... He wanted me to write again and he wanted what I could get from him, but he would not even look me in the eye and acknowledge my plea to him to have some sort of relational restoration, and on top of that eviscerated Phil for telling me about the psych eval comment. And this is all somewhere...Real Marriage has just happened, and they're teaching and talking about not having secrets in marriage, and he's, you know, telling Phil what a fool he was for telling me about. So that whole time from - it was literally my birthday - June 11th, 2012 on, I was done.

25 MIN

Mike Cospers: Phil and Jen had been at the church for 16 years by then, but that loyalty didn't seem to have earned them anything. They'd face that reality again before long. It's remarkable when you consider how dramatically transformed the community around Driscoll was in a matter of about 12 months. An entirely new executive team, a number of long time leaders sent off to plant or pastor at far flung locations. Stepping down from the helm of Acts 29 turned out to also be sort of a step away from Acts 29. Not entirely, but he was certainly less present. The Gospel Coalition as well was not just a place to publish resources and a big conference. To serve on that council meant to serve alongside the presidents of seminaries and academic institutions, and some of the pastors in that room had decades more experience than him. Had he stayed, he'd have found himself regularly surrounded by men whose focus was on building institutions with stability and longevity, people with radically different priorities than the world of entrepreneurial, pragmatic church growth he was gravitating towards now. It's possible and maybe likely that his exit was inevitable for that very reason, but it seems worth noting as one more road not traveled.

Mars Hill's values, allies, partnerships, emphasis, focus, they all looked radically different now, and the church was barreling in a new direction because of it.

 @mikeyanderson

Mike Anderson: This movement and this thing that feels like it's God's hand moving through the world, starts to turn into something that I don't recognize and feels bad.

Mike Cospers: That's Mike Anderson, director of The Resurgence, describing the season of transition that took place as Sutton Turner took over for Jamie Munson.

Mike Anderson: Like in retrospect, I think that Sutton believed that God was working through Mark, and that Mark's words were as if it was Jesus or Paul or someone like that. And I think Sutton really believed that. And so Mark would say something to him that was good, right? Like, Oh, this thing that Mike's doing, amazing. Like, we need more people like Mike. And so I would get praise. And then somebody on the team, or it might not even be related, but like something bad happens and I would get called

in the middle of the night and dressed down, or I would get a thing saying, Be at my office at 7 AM in the morning. And it would just be like, You are not listening to God, you're being... It would bring in the spiritual authority side of things and it would be like, You need to repent, like Mark is... Whatever, Mark said this, you need to go do this. And so it would be this kind of, like, polarity thing of praise followed by spiritual condemnation almost, and it was just an absolute whiplash all the time. And it kind of forced you to either give up or leave.

Mike Cospser: Mike's wife had given birth to their daughter about this time, and she was born blind and in need of multiple eye surgeries in the first year of her life. Stress and anxiety were piling up, along with medical debt, and yet the pressure from Mars Hill never relented.

Mike Anderson: But it got bad enough that we started talking, it starts being like, Hey, things are getting bad. And it's like, we've got to figure out what to do. So then we started just saying like, Alright, we've got to try to figure out how to get out of here. At the time, it's like, Well, I don't want to go work at another church. Like, we thought other churches were not great.

Mike Cospser: Jesse Bryan and Mike weren't close friends when they worked at Mars Hill. In fact, they were often pitted against one another in meetings or while competing for resources.

Jesse Bryan: Mark was playing it perfectly. He brought in a hatchet man to do all the stuff that he secretly wanted to do and didn't have the guts to do himself, because he's a coward. If he wasn't a coward, he would've done it himself. But he is. That's what all the bravado is about. He's scared people are gonna find out how scared he is.

Mike Cospser: Where some, like Mike, found themselves trying to figure out how to survive the environment while they looked for the exits, Jesse's opinions about Sutton were obvious to anyone who'd listen.

Jesse Bryan: Hindsight, the funny... Well, not the funny thing. I asked my wife about it and she was like, You were angry for a year. She's like, That year, for a year of your life, you were angry all the time. I remember I told someone, because at that point then they brought in Sutton, and Sutton started messing with our team. And these are all people I really loved, friends of mine. Friends of mine, friends of mine. And we built this from nothing, and this dude comes in and he is wearing a Harvard ring and [CENSORED]. And I'm like, Get outta here, sell that [CENSORED] to the tourists, I am unimpressed. And it's like, he's in there talking about Middle East and all the work he did in Dubai. And I was like, Cool, I can tell you don't know [CENSORED] about anything. This guy's in here pretending to be someone; it's a joke. And he started messing with our team, and I told somebody, I go, Watching what Sutton is doing to our team is like watching someone drown one of my children.

Mike Cospser: No organization can survive with that kind of animosity in it, so eventually, Driscoll intervened.

30 MIN

Jesse Bryan: Everybody knew how much I hated Sutton, I was pretty vocal about it, and Mark called me in his office and was like, I need you to get up and publicly acknowledge Sutton and back him.

Mike Cospes: This wasn't just a conflict of personalities or values. It was also a conflict of vision. And if any moment makes explicit Driscoll's willingness to leave behind the Mars Hill Church that he'd planted and formed community with in order to go bigger, farther, faster, it was this one. He had two people at his side with extraordinary gifts, but Sutton is the guy you want in charge if you're building out an industrial scale, creating systems that anyone can operate, creating franchises that can be quickly multiplied and spread out. Sutton builds machines. Jesse essentially was running a creative studio inside the church. To make the choice to lean in one direction and not the other was to determine something about what kind of church you were going to be.

Jesse Bryan: Before that, about a year and a half before that or more, maybe, one of my jobs was when we were in country shooting, I was super fortunate cause I loved history. And so I would get to go and hang out with these amazing tour guides. And so, like, if we were gonna shoot it in Turkey or the Hagia Sophia, or Ephesus or whatever, we would get to - us and the film crew - we get to walk around with these, like, scholars, and ask them questions. And I was talking to our guide and we were walking through the Hagia Sophia and it's just such a beautiful place, and I was like, Wow, so this is one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. And he said, No, this is one of the Seven Wonders of the World. He's like, There was a church here before this one. And I go, Really? He goes, Yeah. And so there was a church here and it was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Like an envy of the world, it was so beautiful. And there was an emperor who wanted to put up a statue of his wife inside the church, they went and said, We're gonna put up this statue, and the Bishop said no, and they excommunicated him on this island. I think he died there, if I remember right. And then they went back to the church and they're like, We're gonna come back tomorrow and put this statue in the church. And that night, the congregation burned the church to the ground along with, like, half of the city.

And I loved that story. I remember when I heard that story, I was like, That's how I wanna live. Like, the emperor miscalculated. He thought those people cared about the building. That was a bad move. He didn't understand they were playing a different game. They actually believed in something and they were willing to sacrifice it for it. So they burned down one of the seven ones of the ancient world to make a point: Don't bring your statues into our building.

That story was in my head when I sat down on his couch and he told me I had to get up and publicly back this guy. And I told him, I used these analogies about movies and things, but I said, Listen, man, that guy's a rat. I won't use the language I used, but I was like, That dude's a rat, I can tell he is a rat, and I'm not gonna do it.

Mike Cospes: Driscoll chose to support Sutton, and Jesse agreed to resign, and asked if he could have two weeks to help his team finish projects that were in the works for an upcoming sermon series in the book of Esther.

35 MIN

Jesse Bryan: Mark was like, Yeah, man, for sure. I mean, it's been eight years, you know, best friends, right? It's like, Cool. I went home, I didn't tell my wife yet that I had quit my job. I went home, came back to work the next day, and Sutton was waiting for me and he took my keys and my laptop. And I couldn't afford to buy a laptop, so I went across the street, bought a hard drive, got the photos off my laptop, and that was it. That was the end of my time at Mars Hill. Kicked me out of my own team.

Also, when I left, when I left, no one talked to me for a year. I had one friend who was a pastor at the UW - he had also left - that talked to me, and like Mike. Everyone else stops talking to you. So when you leave, you're dead, you're a dead person. Not only inside of all of your community, but also from a career standpoint. Because now you work for the Enron of churches. So when I quit my job, I had a two-week old at home. I had to go home and tell my wife, who was still healing from having a baby, that I just quit my job, and no one's ever gonna talk to us again. Because I wouldn't kiss his [CENSORED] ring. And I'm glad I didn't. It's the best decision I think I ever made in my life was not to fold on that.

Like, when we talk about the punk rock thing that started it, most of us came out of this, like, punk rock thing. So all of a sudden, it's literally, You want me to sit down with a dude who's wearing a Harvard ring? He's the guy? Are you kidding me? Here's how crazy this [CENSORED] was. When Mars went down, when Mars went down, they liquidated all of the gear and everything at the church, right? Just to give you an idea of how I operate. They liquidated all of this stuff. I showed up. Were you with me? So we showed up to the liquidation event, the bankruptcy event. You know why? Because I was gonna buy my [CENSORED] cameras. I was gonna get back what was ours. And they wouldn't let me in the building because they said it was friends and family only. They wouldn't let me to go to a bankruptcy sale because I was a traitor.

Mike Cosper: It's easy on a certain level to identify with Jesse's anger, but I can't help but notice all the cause for grief, too. Driscoll calling him his best friend, being forced to make the decision right after a baby had been born, a team he's talked to me about with pride when he tells me where they all are now. The fact that it was followed up by a year of silence and abandonment from friends, and then the deeper sense of loss and disconnection that comes from losing your spiritual community.

Mike Anderson left the church on July 31st. Jesse Bryan's last day was August 12th. In the months that followed, new policies were continually put in place to standardize all kinds of practices, especially the on the ground ministries at campuses and on Sundays. That caused friction at one location in particular.

 @bryanzug

Bryan Zug: It was the campus that felt most like the old school, like Mars Hill early days, cuz it was downtown, it was not in the suburbs of Seattle, it was downtown Seattle. It was very close to the tech sector that was emerging in South Lake Union with Amazon and throughout Pioneer Square with other startups and things, and it just felt like kind of the old days.

Mike Cosper: That's Bryan Zug talking about Mars Hill Downtown. Mars Hill Downtown was planted by Tim Gaydos in 2008, and it was truly downtown, a rough neighborhood

known for drugs, homelessness and prostitution. The church set up shop right in the middle of it, and its members got involved in hands-on, gritty ways. Here's Tim Gaydos.

 @timgaydos

Tim Gaydos: There's so many stories of lives being changed and touched and transformed. It really was beautiful and meaningful. I mean, we had... I remember one gal who came in one time to a late service and you could tell she was in bad shape. I mean, literally had black eyes and ended up spending a couple hours hearing her story. She was trafficked here in Seattle, walked the streets outside our church. Her pimp had just beaten her up. And so she walked into the church and she ended up staying. We had a guest condo. The condo complex that we lived in has a...You could reserve a guest condo. And so she stayed there, my wife and I got her a place there, she stayed there for quite a while. And we started hearing more and more of her story about what was going on in the streets of Seattle with girls being trafficked, and that was the beginning of what is now an amazing ministry called Rest. That still exists, that's going very well today. Real Escape from Sex Trafficking.

 @jenzug

Jen Zug: Tim was an amazing bridge builder in the community.

Mike Cospers: That's Jen Zug.

Jen Zug: He was on the Belltown Council, neighborhood council, whatever that was called - business, and he was polar opposite in terms of personality and relating to people and building community.

Bryan Zug: Like city council members he was friends with, they would come to our community Green Clean stuff. And I remember Mark came downtown, and Tim was still there, and he spoke. And I hadn't seen him in a long time, and I just said, Hey, we exchanged. And he was like, How's it going? And I'm like, Yeah, we dig downtown, it's cool, we love the uniqueness of it. And he said to me, like, you know, Tim does things that I don't know how to do. And it was a very telling statement because we were already feeling the tension of, Hey, this difference is threatening, it's a bug, it's not a feature.

Mike Cospers: That would prove true over time as pressure mounted for downtown to begin to look more and more like other Mars Hill campuses.

40 MIN

Jen Zug: At one point, I remember hearing - not firsthand, but through the grapevine - that there was a desire to be like Starbucks. One on every corner, and you would know what to expect, and it would all be, you know, the same brand. And that was the point where I was like, ah, this is not what I signed up for.

Mike Cospers: This meant that some of the involvement in local ministries downtown was met with resistance. Even something as simple as a Christmas coat drive that Central feared would distract from their uniform end of year Christmas communications. Tim also got a reputation for resisting other efforts of control, but this usually amounted to small rebellions, like cutting off the video before announcements, or not participating in calls to giving that he didn't think were appropriate for the needs of the campus.

Things came to a head at the end of 2012 as Downtown was getting ready to move into

a new building. Driscoll was well known in Seattle media, and a reporter from the Seattle Times was assigned to cover the church's opening as the buildup began. Tim was asked about some of Mark's more notorious statements, including comments about gender, Mormonism, and yoga, which of late he'd been calling satanic.

Tim Gaydos: Remember saying something along the lines of, Well, hey, you know what, we all do stupid things and all say stupid things, and kind of left it at that.

Mike Cospers: Tim was actually more self-deprecating than that in the story, where he's quoted as saying, I know I'm a failure, I say dumb things all the time, I know I don't represent Jesus as well as I should.

Tim Gaydos: And of course that was, you know, the quote in the paper. And so I remember getting...Mark reached out and said, Hey, would you come over and let's have a chat. And he was not happy and basically said, Hey man, you know, whose church do you think this is? And I kind of paused for a moment, and was like, Okay, wait a second, is this a trick question. And looked at him and gave him the answer that I knew he wanted to hear, which was, This is yours. And he said, That's right, that's right.

Mike Cospers: That's when he knew he needed an exit strategy. But leaving Mars Hill wasn't gonna be easy. He'd seen what happened to others who'd left.

Tim Gaydos: Mark has a kind of a... Now that you look back, you're like, it's a scorched earth policy where the tactics of the mob, you know, we saw it happen once, we saw it happen twice, and I think on the third time was when we began to really think about, Okay, we need to really think about moving on, because this is not good.

Mike Cospers: Events that took place around the launch of the new building in January, 2013, were what pushed him over the edge.

Tim Gaydos: My assistant was out of town on his honeymoon and Mark showed up. He was preaching live there that day, and so we're in between the first and second service, we're doing a debrief. He wasn't too super happy about how things went the first service. He goes, Where's your assistant at, we need your assistant here. I go, He's on his honeymoon, just got married this weekend. And he was not happy about it. And later that week, he called me into his office and says, You need to fire him. And I was like, You gotta be kidding me, right? Wait, you're serious. And he said, he goes, Hey, you know, this is...Do you guys want to be professional or not, I mean, if he's serious about this job and this ministry, he wouldn't have left on his honeymoon on grand opening day. And that was just the moment... Everything came to a head at that point of, like, okay, you know what, this is out of hand.

Mike Cospers: Not long after, Tim and his wife, Brittany, asked to meet with Mark to sort of send a shot across the bow that they were thinking about leaving.

Tim Gaydos: He goes, I'm going to give you some time. He goes, Why don't you get away for the weekend, I'll pay for you guys getting away for the weekend. I was like, No, thanks, I do not want your money to get me away for the weekend. But he looked at us.

He goes, If you come back and you decide you're leaving, he goes, You're moving out of the area. You're moving out of Washington. And so my wife and I, we walked out of his office, and she just broke down in tears. I mean, she was just like... And she doesn't cry very often, to be honest with you, I cry more than she does. And she was just like, What in the world.

Mike Cospers: They did get away for the weekend, but they didn't take any of Driscoll's money.

Tim Gaydos: We called Dave Bruskas on the way home. They were wondering what our decision was gonna be. I called Dave and I said, Hey Dave, we are gonna leave. And he says, Okay. He goes - and I remember this very clearly - He goes, What is your response to Mark's directive that you move out of the area? And I said, Well, and I said, Dave, if God wants us to stay in the area, how do I disobey God so I can obey Mark. So then the meeting was set up for a couple of days, maybe a day later, two days later. It was a long, horrible meeting.

Mike Cospers: They handed him a document to review with an outline of a severance package, including health insurance. Brittany was pregnant at the time, and they were offering to cover the cost of insurance up and through the birth of the baby. But there were strings attached. He had to sign a non-disclosure agreement, which had become infamous in Mars Hill by that time, and more importantly, a non-compete agreement saying that he couldn't work in ministry within 75 miles of Seattle. That included churches and nonprofits. He'd either have to find work in the marketplace or move more than an hour away. Driscoll told him, I know you're gonna get away and pray to Jesus for next steps, but I've already heard from Jesus in this matter, and you are not planting a church in Seattle. They also made it clear that if he didn't sign, he wouldn't be welcome at the members' meeting, announcing his exit, and that they wouldn't make an effort to honor him there.

Tim Gaydos: They had the pen and they said, Here you go, sign it. I was just... Mark of course jumped in a couple times, just, Hey, this is gonna go really bad for you if you do not sign this

Mike Cospers: Did you sign?

Tim Gaydos: No, I did not. I didn't sign it. I felt like in my conscience, I couldn't do it. And you know, I wouldn't to this day, although I knew it was gonna get... I knew we were in... We were about to enter into a very dark period. I knew that was coming. And certainly it did. I mean, it was... I think I got a call later that day from a pastoral colleague there who called me on the phone. He goes, Dude, what just happened? I go, I don't know, why? He goes, Mark just came right from your meeting into a meeting with me, and said if you plant a church, he's gonna tear it down, brick by brick. I was like, Alright, well.

Mike Cospers: That meeting was on March 5th, 2013, and for the next several days, they kept applying pressure for Tim to sign the non-compete agreement, and he continued to refuse on principle. Finally, on March 10th, the day of the members' meeting, where they'd announce his resignation, they relented and they offered the severance and

benefits anyway. Tim left with an effort to honor the leadership on his way out, and his letter to the congregation made that clear. But by several accounts, that members' meeting was awkward, disjointed. The tension was thick, and for many at the campus, it was the last straw.

Bryan Zug: To force a non-compete clause, it just was so mind-blowing. I was like, Okay, there's the frog in the kettle where you slowly boil to death, and I was like, The gospel is boiled in this organization. It's done.

Mike Cospers: The Zug's resigned their membership on March 13th, after 12 years for Bryan and 15 years for Jen at the church. There were many others that left at that time as well, and the common theme in their exit was the sense that Mars Hill had fundamentally become a different kind of church. Pulling back, you can see an interesting paradox in the moment. One would think that their track record of success and growth would lead to confidence in the face of new churches and ministries popping up around them, that you'd have confidence in your own ability to gather and keep a crowd. But this incident reveals the opposite, a scarcity mindset that bred paranoia and fear in the face of new churches, a sense that they were competition rather than co-laborers.

After leaving Mars Hill, Tim took a job at Union Gospel Mission, a ministry serving downtown Seattle and addressing homelessness and addiction recovery. Eight months later, he planted a Seattle church. So far, no one has torn out a single brick.

We'll be right back.

50 MIN

May 10th, 2013, is another milestone. A long time elder at the church named Dave Kraft filed formal charges of disqualification against Mark with the board of overseers. In the letter he submitted, he identified character qualifications that Mark had failed to meet as an elder, including his reputation for being domineering, quick tempered, and arrogant. According to Sutton, by this time he was starting to feel uneasy about the lack of a workable accountability structure for Mark. His initial sense that Mars Hill needed a board that Driscoll respected was proving not to be effective, and he was also becoming more aware of outside critics of the church. Like the blogger, Wenatchee The Hatchet, who'd been writing about controversy at Mars Hill for years by then.

Nick Bogardus severed his ties to the church in July of 2013. He'd arrived in 2009 as the PR and Media Relations Director, and he worked at the heart of the machine that crafted and curated Driscoll's image for two years. His first day on the job was to purge the archives of Mark's sermons of names that had become problematic, like Lief Moi, Mike Gunn, Paul Petry, and Wendy Alsup.

In 2011, he'd moved to Orange County to plant the campus there, and during that time, he progressively became more concerned about the centrality of media and its formative effect on congregations. You heard him talk about this on a previous episode, how it turned those who gathered for worship into consumers, and failed to develop leaders.

Nick Bogardus: I just started seeing the scope and the power of the church, and in par-

ticular the media and the impact it was having on people, and so I raised those questions because the media was shaping the people.

Mike Cospers: How'd that go?

Nick Bogardus: I was told we don't ask those questions so get on or get out, basically. Paraphrase, but that was it.

Mike Cospers: He resigned shortly after those conversations, and the story of his exit has a deep sense of irony.

Nick Bogardus: They had asked us to stick around at the campus until they could coincide the news of our departure with the news of a building acquisition, so that it could be bad news, good news delivered at the same time. So we had to stick... And we were told not to talk to anybody about it. So we had to stick around, you know, for over a month in this, like, middle ground having to fake it with everybody, like everything's great, we're fine, and inside we were just crumbling. But when my last day finally came and Mark made a video where he announced to the congregation that we were leaving... So again, it was weird, you have this kind of disembodied messenger standing over a congregation with an embodied lead pastor there, and the disembodied guy is saying the person who's there is leaving, it's kind of awkward. But I go home and I go onto the Mars Hill website and The Resurgence website, and someone on staff had deleted all of my articles, everything I had ever written. My name was now erased from the record, just for leaving.

Mike Cospers: These are just a handful of the exit stories, conflicts and abuses that took place during these years. According to someone familiar with HR at the time, the church would have 85% turnover between 2012 and 2014. One conflict after another piled up like kindling, ready to erupt, and yet for many on the inside, it seemed like nothing ever stuck to Mark, nothing ever created restraints.

If you're looking for a moment when the tide shifted, though, I believe it came in late 2013. What began as a juvenile publicity stunt ended up being the spark that lit the fire. And once it was lit, there was almost nothing anyone could do to put it out. Here's Aaron Gray, who was serving as a pastoral resident at the time.

 @aaroncgray

Aaron Gray: There was this event coming up that Mark was doing, called the Act Like Men conference, and it was in, and I don't know if it was him or one of the other executive elders, but had the idea, Hey, let's bring these lead pastor residents along. I mean, the event was a lot of big name guys, especially at the time. It was James MacDonald, Matt Chandler, I think Greg Laurie was there, Lecrae was performing. It was kind of a big deal.

Mike Cospers: Mark had just released a book called, A Call to Resurgence, in which he laid out a gloomy picture of the trajectory of the world around us and called Christians to put aside sectarian fights, unite where they could, and work together for renewal and the spread of the gospel. He included a chapter on the necessity of the Holy Spirit to carry out the work, in something of a defense of his charismatic beliefs.

At the same time, another pastor was promoting a book called *Strange Fire*, a book length critique of charismatic theology. It was longtime critic, John MacArthur. It also turned out that while they'd be in Long Beach, California, for their conference, MacArthur would be hosting his own event about an hour down the road, also called *Strange Fire*.

Aaron Gray: So the night before the *Strange Fire* conference was set to begin, we're there, the group of us lead pastor residents go to a restaurant / brewery sort of place to eat, beers and burgers and chicken wings, we're sitting there and we're ordering, it's noisy, football game's playing on the TV. Mark says, Hey, I had this idea while I was driving over here, and he said, I think I'm gonna go show up tomorrow, I'm gonna go crash the conference tomorrow.

Mike Cospers: One pastor dropping in on the conference/book release of another might be received as lighthearted fun. But for years there had been open hostility, especially from MacArthur and Phil Johnson, who's worked alongside MacArthur since 1981, and had written critically about Driscoll a number of times from his blog, a theological hot take site called *Pyromaniacs*. Some of MacArthur's criticism was focused on the problematic ways Driscoll was handling the scriptures, most notably a series MacArthur wrote called *The Rape of Solomon's Song*, where he tore apart Driscoll's Bible as Sex manual approach to Song of Solomon. But there was broader criticism that was cultural, a critique of contextualization, style, language, and even dress, such as a much shared and quoted critique of Driscoll that MacArthur wrote in 2006, titled *Grunge Christianity*. Their ongoing clash was confusing to many because they shared so many foundational beliefs about things like the Bible and gender, but there was never a sense that they could get along. And whatever one might have imagined about this drop-in at MacArthur's event, it certainly wasn't going to be a happy photo op with the two of them arm in arm.

Aaron Gray: My initial reaction was, Yeah, that would be funny. Because even at that point, my own opinion of John MacArthur was like, he's just so cantankerous. And I'm like, Yeah, that would be kind of funny. And I remember one of the other residents, one of the other lead pastor residents sitting right next to me, just kind of muttering under his breath, goes, I don't think that would be a very good idea.

Mike Cospers: Driscoll's partner in crime for this was James MacDonald, and in the morning, Mark, James, Sutton, and Dave Bruskas piled in the car and drove an hour down the road to MacArthur's church.

Aaron Gray: So we started hearing stuff, you know, we were getting some text messages from other people there, and, Oh, it's hitting Twitter. And so I jump on Twitter and I'm kind of watching the feed along with everyone else, and I see the tweet from Mark that said, Hey, you know, in about an hour, I'm gonna be at the *Strange Fire* conference, giving away new copies of my book on the Holy Spirit, would love to talk to you. It's like, Oh, man. And so you know that something like that's gonna spread like wildfire throughout all the conference attendees. And then, an hour, hour and a half later, whatever, he posts, Well, they confiscated my books.

Mike Cospers: A lot of the initial chatter in response to this on social media was actually on Driscoll's side. Yes, it was juvenile, but clearly MacArthur and his folks had no sense of humor.

Aaron Gray: But then the video started to surface, and there were a number of different people who, you know, in the age of their smartphones, they pulled out their phones and they started recording the whole thing.

Mike Cospers: The audio quality here isn't great, but here's a recording of the confrontation between Driscoll and the church's security.

Security: Mark

Mark Driscoll: Yeah.

Security: I want to introduce you to our head of our security.

Mark Driscoll: Hey, buddy.

Security: Nice to meet you.

Security: Whether you're putting them in people's hands or whether people are going and getting them from the box, same thing.

Security: So he's gonna take the books. So James is over there, waiting for you.

Security: Can we just put them in the Mustang? He'll take them...

Mark Driscoll: Why don't guys just take them, do whatever you want with them.

Security: We're gonna come back in the Mustang. Yeah, we wanna give them back to you,

Mark Driscoll: Great, sir, that's fine.

Security: Okay.

Mark Driscoll: I'd like to give them as a gift. So just take them as a gift.

Security: Well..

Mark Driscoll: Yeah, yeah, just take them as a gift.

Security: Good enough.

Mark Driscoll: Yeah. Thanks guys. Yeah, you bet. Thanks, guys. Aren't you all hot? I would hate that.

 @Janet_Mefferd

60 MIN

Security: Well, this is what I do.

Aaron Gray: I'm looking back on, you know, just the intention behind it. From my perspective, there was a very distinct and a very intentional plan to cause an online dust-up, to cause an online controversy to help promote the sales of the book. And I can remember being in various lead pastor trainings, one time in particular where Mark, he talked about the power of a good crisis, and I view that, scene at the Strange Fire conference, as part of that continuum of, I'm going to manufacture crisis, I'm going to do something kind of provocative to get some attention, to really help with book sales, to really help with people to notice this book.

Mike Cospser: If the goal was to create a crisis and get attention, it worked, but maybe not in the way that Driscoll hoped. His post on Instagram featured Tom Hatter, the church's head of security, and was captioned, Security Confiscated My Books. It was stated so plainly that later attempts to walk it back or reframe it largely fell flat. He couldn't chalk it all up to being a merry prankster. And given that it was disparaging of folks at MacArthur's church, it outraged quite a few. Among them was syndicated radio host, Janet Mefferd.

Janet Mefferd: Coming up this hour, Pastor Mark Driscoll joins me to talk about his book, a Call to Resurgence. That and more this hour on the Janet Mefferd Show.

Mike Cospser: She was familiar with Driscoll before this, but mostly by reputation, as Mark the cussing pastor. And because of that, she'd never had interest in bringing him on her show. But the events at Strange Fire got her attention, and at about the same time, Tyndale House, the publisher of Driscoll's book, had sent her a copy and asked her to consider featuring him on the show.

Janet Mefferd: He was busted in a lie, and for me as somebody who likes to interview people and have, you know, I've interviewed lots of people when I was a journalist, I said that would be a good interview. And so what I told my producer was, Convey to Tyndale House that I wanna ask him some tough questions, ahead of time. And Tyndale House came back and said, Well, what kinds of hard questions? And we said, We want to inquire about Strange Fire and what went on there. And they came back a little while later and said, Yeah, he's in, he's in.

Mike Cospser: Often, when doing promotional interviews, a host will know very little about the book their guest is promoting. There's almost no way they could keep up with the material they'd have to cover. But in this particular case, Mefferd decided to read the book, and almost immediately noticed something.

Janet Mefferd: I started to read and I got to the first section of the book, and I noticed that he had plagiarized a man whose work I knew very, very well, and that was Peter Jones, Dr. Peter Jones. And I said, This guy stole from him.

Mike Cospser: Mefferd knew Peter personally, and had spoken at his think tank.

Janet Mefferd: And I immediately called Peter, and I said, This guy plagiarized you. And

I talked it over with some people in his ministry, and Peter being a very gracious man said, Well, you know, it's okay if people disseminate my ideas because it's important for everybody to know about this paradigm of oneism and twoism, which is kind of Peter's thing.

Mike Cosper: A few days later, she found another passage that had been plagiarized, worse than the first one.

Janet Mefferd: I went back to Peter and I said, Okay, are you with me now? Are you with me now? And he said, Yeah, if he can quote this guy in this other section of the book, he can certainly quote me, yes, go ahead with it.

Mike Cosper: Driscoll appeared on the Janet Mefferd show on November 21st, 2013.

Janet Mefferd: Why was it you decided to go out there in the first place?

Mark Driscoll: I was in the area. I, uh, had a men's conference in Long Beach and I was on my way to pick up my sons at the airport, and they were coming down...

Mike Cosper: It's a bit tangential, but two different people familiar with these events have confirmed that in no way was any of this connected to getting anyone from the airport. Nonetheless, Mefferd asked him to clarify if in fact they'd threatened to confiscate his books, which Driscoll hedged on.

Mark Driscoll: Yeah, they came up multiple times and told me that they had to be removed from campus and that they were gonna remove them and put them in, I think it was a yellow Mustang, and I didn't understand that because I didn't have a yellow Mustang, I didn't come in a yellow Mustang. So I can tell you're a defender of Pastor John, I could tell this is an issue for you, and what I write about in A Call to Resurgence is this issue of tribalism...

Janet Mefferd: Uh huh.

Mark Driscoll: ...that tribes...

Mike Cosper: As you can hear, he deflects to his book, but Mefferd brings it back to the subject of Strange Fire.

Janet Mefferd: You're saying they did confiscate your books.

Mark Driscoll: Yeah, yeah. They kept telling me either you need to remove them, or we will remove them. And when they said, We're going to take them, I said, Well, then go ahead and keep them.

Janet Mefferd: Alright, hang on just a moment. We need to go to a quick break. We'll come back with Pastor Mark Driscoll, and we're going to talk about his book...

Mike Cosper: Shortly after the commercial break, they return to the book and Driscoll

mentions Peter Jones as a point of reference.

Janet Mefferd: I'm glad that you mentioned Dr. Jones because as people will know, he is the foremost evangelical scholar on the rise of neopaganism, has coined the terms twoism and oneism, which you mentioned in your book. Now, I was reading your book in preparation for the interview, and when I came across this section on the neopaganism, I was a little interested to note that you didn't quote him and you didn't footnote him. You have a footnote after the first sentence where you mentioned twoism and oneism, and it says, See for example, Truth Exchange, and Peter Jones' book, One or Two. But then you go on for several more pages and you never footnote him. Why?

Mark Driscoll: Um, I... Peter Jones is actually a friend of mine, I've had dinner with him, his wife is really great too, she is a really smart, um, great gal. In my book... Dr. and I talk a lot about his concepts. In this book, I took his big idea and worked it out through the cultural implications, but I wasn't working specifically from his text. But, uh, I think Peter would tell you, I love him a lot, we're good friends, and I've learned a lot from him. Most of what I learned from him was actually sitting down over meals and him talking and me listening, um, and I should have been taking notes. That would've been a little easier to footnote.

Mike Cospers: Throughout the interview, Driscoll oscillates between pleading ignorance, insisting that he credited Jones sufficiently, and deflecting to criticizing Mefferd.

Mark Driscoll: Man, I thought we'd have a better interview than this. It seems like you're having sort of a grumpy day.

Janet Mefferd: Oh, I'm not having a grumpy day. The problem that I'm seeing here, I was actually really excited to talk to you about the book. In all honesty, Mark, as a Christian, cuz I have the same concerns you do about cultural Christianity going away, and real Christianity needing a revival. And I...

Mark Driscoll: Let's talk about that and not a footnote.

Janet Mefferd: Let me say one... Let me say one other thing.

Mike Cospers: He also makes an appeal to his own good work that he's accomplishing.

Mark Driscoll: You're gonna take the entire interview and find what you are critical of and the nail you're gonna hammer so that your audience can see you. hammer Mark Driscoll today. Mark Driscoll loves Jesus, Mark Driscoll loves you, Mark Driscoll's in the least... one of the least churching cities in America, preaching Jesus for 17 years, trying to see people get saved, and I was hoping we could help others talk about...Man, their kids...

Mike Cospers: As the interview wraps up, Mefferd gives a defense of her line of questioning.

Janet Mefferd: ...to ask you, it's a public book, people are gonna be reading it. You have an awful lot of people who follow you, and I think it's a fair question.

65 MIN

Mark Driscoll: I don't, I don't. I think it's... I think it's rude and I think the intent behind it is not very Christlike, but I'll receive it and I'll try to receive it graciously and humbly. But I wouldn't allow you to pretend to take a generous, gracious, moral gospel high ground. I, I would... I would not... I would not just give you a pass on that. Out of love for you, cuz I want you to grow as well. And I think, um, I think it's a good opportunity for you to grow as well.

Mike Cospser: Here's Janet Mefferd again, looking back.

Janet Mefferd: Somebody after the fact referred to what I did as committing the sin of journalism. In the aftermath of all of it, I understood very clearly from lots and lots and lots of people who are around me that you are not supposed to do what you just did. And I thought to myself, That's ridiculous. Because what you're really saying is that dishonest people who steal from other Christians should never be confronted because that's just rude.

Mike Cospser: While there was some support from effort in the aftermath, overwhelmingly she was criticized for her tone and the manner of her approach.

Janet Mefferd: Oh, I was shell shocked by the reaction when that interview aired, because pretty much everybody turned on me, everybody. Everybody internally, everybody externally, I felt utterly alone.

Mike Cospser: Pressure mounted quickly. Tyndale, the publisher, issued a statement supporting Driscoll and denying the accusation. They wrote, A number of people at Tyndale reviewed the tape and were stunned, not only by the accusations, but by the belligerent tone of Ms. Mefferd's questioning. In many corners, especially amongst Driscoll supporters, that became the story, that Mefferd had been rude, and pressure mounted for her to apologize. Pressure she eventually couldn't resist.

On December 4th, she took to the air and apologized for her tone and approach, though she didn't retract the accusation of plagiarism. By then, she had published side by side samples from the books on her website as evidence for her case, but she took them down that day and took down the broadcast of the original interview from her site as well. I asked her how she made that decision.

Janet Mefferd: It was the company, it was the president of the network at the time, who said that, We're not gonna make you apologize, but, dot, dot, dot, dot, dot, and there were some very pointed threats that were made at me. So it was clear, If you want to continue to do what you're doing, you darn well better get out there and apologize. I was so mad, because it was wrong. Why, why in the world should the whistleblower have to be the one who's in trouble? Everybody was coalescing around Mark Driscoll as a godly man, and how could you bring him on the radio and do such horrible things to a godly man? I said, Well, godly men don't plagiarize. It's just simple. It was very simple for me, but it became very complex for everybody else because there was money involved, there were powerful people involved, there were brands to be protected.

Mike Cospser: One voice that wrote in support of Mefferd was Carl Trueman. He noted

how the phenomenon of celebrity played into people's reactions to the interview, and that a significant difference between a celebrity like Driscoll and a less famous figure is that we tolerate bad behavior from celebrities more regularly. Just consider how celebrities seem to weather all kinds of controversy, from addiction to sexually inappropriate behavior, to abuse of people who work for them. To challenge a celebrity is to play knowing the deck is stacked against you. The mob is already on their side and behind the mob are institutions whose own financial wellbeing is vested in the branding and success of the celebrity.

Blessed are the celebrities, he wrote, for they will be rigorously held to a much lower standard of behavior than the rest of us.

Regardless of her apology, something had shifted. Driscoll had been through contentious interviews before, but typically those were about his doctrine or his personality. Here it was a direct confrontation about a character issue, and something about the atmosphere around him, where he'd been almost untouchable for so long, suddenly changed.

Janet Mefferd: When you get into a media situation, the dynamic shifts a little bit because when you come on a radio show or a TV show, the host is in charge. You can walk off if you'd like, but the host is running the show, the host is posing the questions. And in that case, he couldn't run away. He really had no choice. He had to answer it somehow.

70 MIN

Mike Cospes: By this time there was a small chorus of bloggers and social media influencers who'd been covering Driscoll and controversies at Mars Hill, but there was a newcomer to the mix in the days following his appearance on the Mefferd Show: Warren Throckmorton. In a Weekend Roundup post on November 30th, there are two link-filled paragraphs about Driscoll's plagiarism allegations, his first appearance on that blog. The final sentence of that Roundup begins, I plan to look at this issue in more detail next week. Those detailed looks would continue for months, years actually, and play a significant role in the fate of the church and the fate of Driscoll.

 @wthrockmorton

Warren Throckmorton: I didn't know that much about Mark Driscoll. I'm not a celebrity preacher kind of person, I don't really know that much, or I didn't know that much about them.

Mike Cospes: This is Warren Throckmorton. He's a psychology professor at Grove City College, and has been blogging about human sexuality, public policy, mental health, history, and religion, since 2005.

Warren Throckmorton: As I got into it, I got into the claims and looked at what she had to say and explored him a little more, I thought, Well, actually there is something to this.

Mike Cospes: There's a sense in which he was actually an ideal candidate to respond to this particular moment in the story. For several years, much of Throckmorton's blogging had been focused on debunking the work of David Barton, a Christian nationalist known for writing books and curriculum about the origins of the U.S. that are popular in some very conservative and homeschool circles. That led to the publication of a book

called *Getting Jefferson Right*, which Throckmorton co-wrote with Michael Coulter. The book carefully deconstructs many of Barton's Christian nationalist myths, and it led to one of Barton's books being pulled from publication.

His foray into looking at Driscoll didn't come from any specific interest in his work. I think in a way that's also reflected in his interest in Barton. Warren has a mind for detail, a mind attuned for the kind of research and cataloging necessary to track instances of plagiarism. After his initial research, he wrote up reflections on the story in a sense that there was truth to the allegations. For long time readers of his blog, it wasn't the most exciting subject and it didn't get a lot of traction.

Warren Throckmorton: It wasn't very long, though, after that... I mean, I wrote another, like a follow up piece, I think, within a couple of days, and it wasn't very long before the folks who were part of the church and former staff members started to contact me. I think it was within a couple of weeks, actually, less than that. And they had receipts, you know, as they say. They had the documents showing that that not only did *The Resurgence* book have some citation problems, but there were other books with a good bit of material from Docent Research that he didn't write.

Mike Cospes: On December 9th, Intervarsity Press published a statement, noting that several paragraphs from their new Bible commentary appeared without attribution in a book called *Trial*, which was based on First and Second Peter. Throckmorton followed up by publishing a side by side comparison of the material, as well as highlighting a statement that was buried several pages deep on Mars Hill's website, acknowledging it as a citation error and not so subtly casting blame on a researcher connected to a company called Docent Research. That assistant was Justin Holcomb, who later had joined the staff at the church.

The role of the Docent Group in these allegations of plagiarism is important. For several years, they were providing Mark with sermon briefs for his series, which were not ghost-written sermons, as some have alleged. Several people close to Driscoll actually made it emphatically clear that he never would've trusted someone to write sermons that were better than his own, even if it meant hopping on stage and just winging it. Docent also prohibits ghostwriting sermons, and monitors it with their clients. The briefs they delivered Driscoll were lengthy summaries of academic and theological resources, other pastors' approaches to a book of the Bible or a topic, and issues that the assigned researcher thought were important enough to highlight. The brief on Ephesus, for example, which is available on Warren Throckmorton's blog, is almost 300 pages long. It's those briefs that seem to be the root source of plagiarized material, likely copied and pasted into book manuscripts. This was also true of later plagiarism allegations that emerged in the coming months.

Mars Hill's statement about the *Trial* book was blaming Docent and Holcomb. However, Andy Crouch reported in *Christianity Today* that Docent's records showed that Holcomb's material as delivered, had all the footnotes intact. At some point between the delivery of his research and the completion of the manuscript with Driscoll's byline, the footnotes were lost or deleted.

The emergence of these allegations, and the response by the church, provided a peek behind the curtain of how the Mark Driscoll content machine worked. As several others pointed out at the time, Driscoll would often talk about how he was churning out hundreds of hours of sermons and thousands of pages of content a year. But as Andy Crouch pointed out in a column at the time, the “Pastor Mark Driscoll” who created all that content, was a fiction, an amalgam of a team that was curating content under the brand Pastor Mark Driscoll.

He was all too ready at this moment to issue his byline when it came time for accountability for that brand. That peek behind the curtain was also a driving force for Warren Throckmorton in the weeks and months ahead.

Warren Throckmorton: One of the things that hooked me, it had to do with plagiarism and ghostwriting and the like, and it had to do with an early reason why the church said that there were these citation errors. It had to do with, there were mistakes in the content management system, and man, that really hit me, that the church had a content management system. You know, a lot of churches around the country are little churches, and it’s hard for them to get a couple nickels to rub together to, you know, keep the lights on. And Mars Hill had a content management system where they had people they could pay to do research, to write stuff for Mark to edit and put his name on, so that he could get royalties. And I’m thinking, So that’s how celebrity pastors live. That’s how it works. And so the gulf between that Christianity and the Christianity that I live in and that most people live in, that’s what really drew me into this story. I couldn’t believe how great that gulf is. I wanted to understand it, I wanted to expose it and I still do.

Mike Cospers: Yet another milestone came in December with a post at The Gospel Coalition by Jared Wilson. Driscoll’s ministry had a significant impact on him about eight years earlier.

 @jaredcwilson

Jared Wilson: I was in the midst of a pretty broken situation. My marriage was a wreck, I was, you know, living in the guest bedroom of our home, and went through a pretty significant period of depression, suicidal thoughts and ideation, that sort of thing. And my lifeline at the time was, I was listening to the sermons of Mark Driscoll and John Piper, and it just opened my eyes and it became a kind of oxygen for me. The event that I, you know, described as gospel wakefulness came out of that period of depression. And the Lord began to restore my marriage and open these little doors for ministry that I’m doing for the first time, gospel centered, you know, preaching. And really this all came out of the wreckage of my own life.

Mike Cospers: There are countless stories like Jared’s. Pastors who encountered the gospel through Mark’s preaching and found themselves called to church planting, pastoring and other ministry. Pastors who even in the turmoil of 2013 still felt gratitude and loyalty to him. But as the years had passed, there was an increasing sense of distance between what Jared felt his vocation as a pastor should look like, and the one modeled by Mark.

Jared Wilson: The more familiarity, I think, one gets with the biblical qualifications for eldership, which is, I think is just a huge... I mean, it’s such a glaring thing in the Bible,

appears at least three different times. First Timothy 3, and Titus 1, and then First Peter 5 even. Three times we're told, This is what a pastor needs to be. And yet, evangelical culture and evangelical churches, we tend to think that as an afterthought, we want the gifted dynamic, whatever. And I wasn't familiar really with those passages early on either, and as I became more familiar with like, Okay, this is actually the bar that is set for pastors, not that they would be fiery speakers, or clever even writers, or being able to turn phrases or command attention, or have great leadership gifts. Those are all good things in the right measure. But when it says long tempered and not quarrelsome, and gentle and hospitable, all of those sorts of things, I think that is what tells us what a Christ-like pastor is. So some of us began to see, Okay, the pictures aren't matching up. He's taken a minor note in Christ's ministry and made it the major note of his ministry.

And you know what's fascinating, Mike, is there are guys who in the reformed camp - in fact, only a handful of guys perhaps in the reformed, kind of, tribe who were critics of Driscoll back in the day who are now really upset that they don't get credit for being critics of Driscoll or whatever, and they themselves are the ones who are most rehearsing or recycling his demeanor from back then. They're the most strident, most uncompassionate, they have the most rancor and guile on social media, but they want this credit for, you know, calling out Driscoll back in the day when they're just sort of repeating his mistakes. And what they say is, Well, Jesus turned over tables and Jesus pronounced woes and all those sorts of things. And they don't see that that wasn't the major, you know, the major note of Christ's ministry, that was a minor note in his ministry.

Mike Cospers: It wasn't just a temperament thing either. It was the juvenile antics with James MacDonald. It was the stories that would drip out of the church about how people were let go. It was an ever-expanding sense of instability and unhealth. By this time, Jared was a blogger at TGC and was regularly speaking at Acts 29 events. Everywhere he went, Driscoll's transformation was the topic of conversation.

Jared Wilson: It's like, the house is on fire, and we're all just acting like it's not on fire. And I thought, Is someone gonna say the house is on fire? Like, you know, I don't feel like I'm supposed to be the guy to do it, why isn't so and so saying something. So I'm assured that behind the scenes things are happening; publicly no one's saying anything, and I'm wondering what my place is as a blogger at TGC. I'm not a council member, all these sorts of things. And eventually I just got... I started thinking about all the young guys, even guys younger than me, who looked up to him and are part of the movement, and maybe there's a confusion there, and I felt an opportunity was being missed to kind of speak to them, to kind of hold their hand, to say in effect, It's okay to move on.

Mike Cospers: The post is titled, Regarding Mark Driscoll, and it's still up at TGC. He expresses that gratitude. He pushes back on Driscoll's efforts to blame Holcomb and Docent. He tells younger pastors to move on. And in the end, he appeals like a brother to Mark to focus on the gospel that had inspired Jared and others a decade before. Show us why we were so drawn to you in the beginning, he writes, I'm asking you to show us Jesus, He's become lost in your shadow.

Back at Mars Hill Downtown, another story line was unfolding that December. This one would be like a time bomb though, something counting down in the months ahead.

It started when Jeff Bettger was at an event for Mars Hill's resourcing wing called RE:TRAIN. You may remember Jeff from a previous episode, he'd been around the church since nearly the beginning, was a fixture in the Seattle punk rock scene, and had been one of the primary leaders at The Paradox. He told the story about Driscoll handing over his honorarium after an event, early on in the church when everyone, including Mark, was pretty much broke. But he did it so Jeff could buy a ring and marry his girlfriend. Jeff had endured all the ups and downs up through these years, including the exit of Tim Gaydos at Mars Hill Downtown. But that December he had his breaking point.

🐦 @jsuffering

Jeff Bettger: What happened was the ResultSource campaign, I found out about it while I was at RE:TRAIN, and I was already a volunteer pastor at Mars Hill. That was definitely the last straw. Like, it sounded like they were using these marketing dynamics and money spent in order to sell more, which ultimately would end up in Mark's pocket.

Mike Cospers: He resigned his membership over it, and not long after, wrote a lengthy blog post processing the situation.

Jeff Bettger: To me, it was an act of repentance, was to write this blog post and say that this is something that they said is ethically fine, and I don't think it is so I can't be here anymore. And then I was basically called by my friends at meetings to repent of my own repentance, essentially is what they were telling me to do, and I was like, I can't do that, I'm sorry, I'm not taking it down.

Mike Cospers: His blog normally only got a few hits from donors who supported his ministry, 10 or 20 a day. This post got 5,000 hits that first day. And the passage that attracted the most interest read, I have witnessed firsthand the tyranny of injustice done in the name of God, layoffs during Christmas, weeks after new children are born and first homes are purchased, the use of tithe money to purchase books at retail cost in order to build a man's platform and make the New York times bestseller lists, all with the name of God stamped on it.

The date of this blog post was December 4th, 2013, right as the plagiarism concerns were starting to gain steam, and the New York times bestseller scheme was right there in plain sight, counting down, ready to explode about three months later.

🐦 @davebruskas

Dave Bruskas: Hello, everybody. Good to see you guys.

Mike Cospers: This audio is from a video call made between Sutton Turner, Dave Bruskas, and all the lead pastors at the Mars Hill campuses.

85 MIN

Mike Cospers: Quick heads up, It has a few glitchy moments.

Dave Bruskas: Merry Christmas. A week from today, Christmas Eve, yahoo. Hope you guys are excited about that. Uh, good to see you guys.

Mike Cospers: That voice is Dave Bruskas, and it's not just a trick of the audio, no one on the call is sharing his enthusiasm. It was Tuesday, December 17th, a little less than a month since the Mefferd interview, and ever since, the entire church had been working

to respond to the allegations. This next voice is Sutton Turner.

Sutton Turner: Hi, guys. Been a long couple of weeks since really started... things started happening with the Strange Fire. And so today, Tyndale is going to issue a statement that will come out basically going through The Call to Resurgence, the citation errors in Call to Resurgence. And then there's a pretty good amount of statement from Pastor Mark on the issue of Trial.

Mike Cospers: Trial is a reference to a study guide written under Driscoll's byline for a series based on First and Second Peter.

Sutton Turner: So that's gonna be a Tyndale statement. It's gonna come out as a Tyndale press release. And then before that actually happens we're going to post a City post to all of our church, so all 20,000 people that are on The City. Just it's from Pastor Mark, kind of recognizing what's been going on and then having a link to the press release that Tyndale's putting out.

Mike Cospers: By this time, the plagiarism allegations were coming out in a constant flood.

Sutton Turner: Something broke today. Another plagiarism case is coming out. It's gonna... It's gonna allege plagiarism with Real Marriage book, with Grace Driscoll and Dan Allender.

Mike Cospers: Just to clarify, since the audio there cut out a bit, this allegation was that Grace Driscoll plagiarized Dan Allender in one of her chapters from Real Marriage.

Sutton Turner: So that's gonna happen, and it's actually post... there was a blog that came out today, so that'll stir it even more. So we're not going to make comment on that because - why, because we're in conversations with, just today, Crossway Books, because they're alleging plagiarism in Death by Love, that was a Mark... Pastor Mark book.

Mike Cospers: The audio gets really bad here, but Sutton goes on to describe how they're working with publishers, agents and authors to try and smooth over these discoveries day by day. There are a couple of other things about this call that I find significant in understanding the culture of Mars Hill and the unfolding events.

The first is just the weariness. Sutton actually talks about it at one point, how these charges are coming like a flood, and others talk about emails and texts at all hours of the day and night from members and leaders asking about it. It's only December. And as much as there had been controversy in the past, they were only at the leading edge of the worst of it.

The second thing is the degree to which Mars Hill as an institution is taking responsibility for responding to the charges, and the degree to which they're defensive of Mark automatically. These books, with the exception of the Trial study guide, were not Mars Hill's intellectual property. They weren't created with obligations by or for Mars Hill. The contracts and financial arrangements were made between Mark and the publishers.

90 MIN

And yet the staff was mobilized not only in responding to concerns from members, which was understandable, but in working to smooth over the offenses themselves. It speaks again to the privilege of a celebrity, that almost any other individual or leader in another institution wouldn't have.

But to be clear, I don't think this was cynical or purely pragmatic on the part of the leaders on this call, including Sutton and Dave. I think they were all immersed in a world, perhaps even captive to a frame of mind that understood that the mission and flourishing of the church depended on protecting Driscoll's reputation and keeping him in the pulpit. In other words, they were true believers.

Dave Bruskas: You can use the word plagiarism, and that can mean a lot of things, but to the people who most want to discredit Pastor Mark, what it basically means is he's stealing other people's ideas for his own self-promotion. It's like he's cutting and pasting pieces of books and stuff, and it's...Nothing could be further from the truth than that. If anybody cares most about making sure proper citation happens, it's him. You know, so I think there's a... I think there's a... that grieves, that that's a... that's a... that's a grieving process to have people so quickly go to the character, and to assassinate motive. I mean, it's just shocking. And, and we expect, man, we expect the stranger to go after us. We totally get that. And we even expect some elements of maybe liberal evangelicalism to go after. But even the way in which some of the folks that are in our own family, Acts 29, the reformed family, some of the reformed scholars have gone after it, is just brutal, and it's ungodly. So that, that hurts.

Mike Cospers: Not everyone was there, of course. Turnover on the staff continued at an aggressive pace as people became disillusioned. But even among those who stayed, not all were true believers. Joe Day, for instance, had been connected to Mars Hill since 1999, and in 2014 was a pastor at Shoreline.

 @joeday

Joe Day: Yeah. I felt like 100% convinced that my calling at that point in time from, like, 2013, basically until the end, was to, for better or for worse, try and do what I can to make sure that the people at Mars Hill Shoreline were cared for. So that's why I stayed on. By that time, I think I was... I'd been in it so long, I had bought the Kool-Aid for so long. I don't know how effective I was at caring for the church, but my hope was that I could just be there and be alongside, or to at least say, Hey, I'm here with you, we're in this together, kind of thing.

Mike Cospers: It was March when the ticking time bomb set by Jeff Bettger went off.

 @WarrenColeSmith

Warren Cole Smith: You know, I've always had some interesting concern with book publishing. I'd written about some book publishing scandals before, plagiarism and other things, for World magazine.

Mike Cospers: That's Warren Cole Smith. On March 5th, he published an article at World titled Unreal Sales for Real Marriage, exposing the scheme to get Real Marriage on the New York times bestseller list.

Warren Cole Smith: So the subject itself was pretty fascinating to me, but I think one

of the things that caused me to pay particular attention was becoming familiar with a man named Sealy Yates. Sealy Yates is a literary agent. In fact, over the years he became sort of one of the mega literary agents. There were two or three big literary agents in the Christian world. Ended up being Mark Driscoll's agent, was David Jeremiah's - in fact, I think still is David Jeremiah's agent. So a lot of these guys that ended up getting their books on the New York Times bestseller list all had Sealy Yates as their agent, and they all had a relationship with ResultSource. Sealy Yates was sort of the connector between these guys and the folks at ResultSource.

Mike Cosper: He'd been looking out for evidence of the scheme for some time.

Warren Cole Smith: What was happening with a lot of these Christian writers is that there was no organic build to the sales of the book. They would pop onto the New York Times bestseller list with tens of thousands of sales in one week, and then you'd never hear from them again, they were gone. But the author himself was able to brag from then on that he was a New York times bestselling author. Many times when a book reaches the New York Times bestselling list, bookstores around the country will give special treatment, special placement of those books in a display in the bookstore, so that does tend to help with the sales. So I started looking for books. I actually created a massive spreadsheet and started looking for books on the Christian and Self-Help chart, that only appeared one time on the list, and that's how I was able to kind of surface Real Marriage and some of the other books and authors that we've mentioned.

Mike Cosper: Pulling this off by ResultSource was a well-orchestrated effort. And as later reporting revealed, the Real Marriage campaign was pretty typical of their process. In the past, Mars Hill had purchased books for its bookstore and members through Driscoll or his LLC at about \$7 a piece. The markup at the bookstore would generate profit for the church, and there would be no royalties for Driscoll. With ResultSource, the church was committed to buying 11,000 copies of the book at retail prices, 6,000 as individual sales, and 5,000 as bulk sales. These, however, would generate a royalty for Driscoll. You couldn't just go online and order 11,000 books though. Purchases had to appear authentic and scattered, and not too large so that they didn't tip off the systems that tally sales for the Times' ranking, that someone was trying to game it.

In total, according to Smith's reporting, the purchase would've been somewhere around \$216,000 for the books alone. In addition, the church was responsible for covering any potential shipping costs, and ResultSource charged a fee of \$25,000 to coordinate purchases from a wide variety of sources, bulk shipping books to 90 different addresses with no more than three per state, and masking their manipulation of the system behind the use of a thousand methods of payment, including credit cards and gift cards.

95 MIN

To generate the individual sales, Mars Hill promoted their Real Marriage campaign, the book release, the series, and the Driscoll's multi-city tour, by offering a free copy of the book to anyone who donated \$25 and more, which they framed as supporting the ministry of Mars Hill Church, The Resurgence, and Acts 29. In reality, this \$25 was the pass through for these individual sales, designed to ensure that they had the funds and addresses necessary to deliver to ResultSource.

Responsibility for the decision to use ResultSource is a bit of a hot potato. For sure, Mars Hill's executive leaders in late 2011 were all aware of it and Sutton Turner's on the record saying he objected to it. I've seen emails that corroborate that. But he also acknowledges having signed the contract because the check had been written.

Warren Cole Smith, in his reporting, found correlation between Sealy Yates and the use of ResultSource by other authors as well. Jamie Munson had been the executive pastor as these decisions were in process in 2011, but he resigned in August of that year before all of this really unfolded.

The only thing that is clear is that Driscoll was aware and the church spent the money to fund it. From the moment the scandal broke, Mars Hill's PR director, Justin Dean, stated that Mark Driscoll never profited off sales to the church and that the church recouped more than \$200,000 for its investment. That's not quite true though. Technically Driscoll did earn royalties based on all of those sales, since they were retail purchases. According to Sutton Turner, who unlike Dean had access to the church's accounting, at the end of 2012 Mark was encouraged to reimburse the church for the royalties he'd earned from ResultSource sales, which he did, but that only accounts for a portion of the lost revenue that resulted from purchasing retail, and doesn't account for the additional \$25,000 spent hiring ResultSource.

They also lost the potential profits from marking up bulk sales at their bookstore, and they lost money on the shipping costs incurred to send bulk purchases to Seattle from New York. There also was never an accounting of whether all 5,000 of those bulk purchases actually sold. There were, however, lots of accounts of boxes and boxes of unsold books that were thrown away or donated when Mars Hill closed its doors at the end of 2014.

It should also be said that the purchase of using ResultSource wasn't just bragging rights about being called a New York Times bestseller. Earning the label meant more attention from other media, feature spots in bookstores and other lists online, and the potential for much greater earnings, better contracts and advances in the future. And all of this is to say nothing of the innumerable hours of labor by the staff of Mars Hill to promote the Real Marriage campaign and sermon series.

To say Driscoll didn't profit from all of this is false on many levels. And even if one shrugs at the idea of gaming the Times list, which some people have, it was done with church funds, in spite of the fact that the book's contract and benefits all went directly to Driscoll.

Things just intensified after the Real Marriage story broke. By then, Throckmorton and others had accounted for plagiarism in seven of Driscoll's books, with several books containing multiple instances of plagiarism, and Real Marriage containing five. The 2007 bylaws change, and the firing of Paul Petry and Bent Meyer were getting renewed interest as well. Turnover on the staff continued, and younger leaders like Aaron Gray, who just six months earlier had been a pastoral resident, found themselves quickly moved into more senior leadership positions. On March 9th, he became the pastor of Mars Hill Shoreline.

Aaron Gray: And at that point too, my experience of Mars Hill, Yeah, there was, there was hard work, but I'd had a great experience up to that point, and I just did not know the history. I didn't know. I didn't know... I just didn't know what I didn't know. I can remember we did a leadership sync-up one time, early on in my time, maybe in April, right after Easter, there at the Shoreline campus. And I used the phrase... I can't remember exactly what was the point I was trying to make, but I used the phrase, something about, you know, Throwing under the bus. Well, I didn't know that a number of years earlier, maybe five or six, seven years earlier, Mark had used that, and it was like a hugely controversial thing where he had said, You're either on the bus or you get off the bus and the bus is gonna run over you. And there was this thing, this deep wounding in the history of Mars Hill Church related to the phrase, Run over by the bus. I had no idea. And I used that, and man, the reaction at that leadership sync was like just short of pitchforks and torches gonna come after me, because holy cow, I had no idea that that was there, and it was all that kind of stuff.

So from the moment that I stepped in as the campus pastor of Shoreline, till the moment that Mars Hill shut down at the end of 2014, it felt like a weekly bomb was dropped. Just one thing after another, without a moment to breathe. There was a time, as the campus pastor of Shoreline, where I knew the names of more people who had left the church than who were still there. Because there were a lot of godly and mature Christians and they came to me and they said, Aaron, we don't know you, you seem like a decent person, we don't trust the senior leadership so we're leaving the church, God bless you. I had that meeting or phone call 30 times, 40 times, and I knew all those people's name because they were the ones that emailed me or wanted to sit and meet. And I didn't know the names of the people who were still participating in Sunday worship and remaining as a part of Mars Hill. So it was just an insane nine months.

Mike Cospers: Driscoll issued an apology on March 14th, saying he wanted his angry young prophet days to be over, and his days as a spiritual father to be ahead of him. It was a phrase he'd use again. He acknowledged that ResultSource was a mistake, and said he'd asked his publisher and others to no longer use placement on the Times list as part of the book's marketing. For the rest of the letter, he talks about pulling back, staying off social media, not traveling so much and doing fewer media appearances, not wanting to be a celebrity pastor, and wanting instead to be present and focused at the church and on his family. He also said he is in the best health of his life, more optimistic than ever, and excited for the days ahead.

But for the days ahead, the bad news kept dropping. 20 former elders were asking for a meeting with the executive elders and the board for mediation, Warren Throckmorton was receiving more leaked documents and looking into the Mars Hill Global Fund, an initiative that to outside observers appeared to allow you to designate funds for international missions, but in fact was often used for initiatives inside the U.S. for the church. And members kept streaming out the door.

Back in February, Phil Smidt had told Jen that if things didn't change at the church, they'd be out by Veteran's Day in November.

Jen Smidt: It took about six weeks of him asking questions and he was fired at the end

of May, told, You either in writing or verbally say that you trust the executive elders implicitly, or you are out. They asked him to resign and he said, I am not the one who needs to resign, I am not leaving, and so they fired him.

Mike Cospers: Phil served at the Ballard campus and together he and Jen went back there to pack up his office on his last day.

Jen Smidt: Phil was just kind of a shell of a man, and I said, I'm gonna go with you. So we went down and really spent the whole day just sobbing, like packing up books, packing up memories, talking about all that we had experienced and all of the...Like, it had been our whole lives for 18 years and it was just a profoundly difficult moment. The lead pastor that fired Phil sat in his office and didn't interact with us. A couple of the men that did help us, like, load our cars, one of them quit the next day because it was really a traumatic, powerful experience. But I sat downstairs - Phil had a meeting for a little while after we'd packed his office, and I sat downstairs in the massive Ballard auditorium, and all the lights were off, it was dark. And I just sat in the back and almost felt like watching a movie reel of all that had happened over the course of the years that we'd been in this building and been a part of this church that we'd now been told, like literally, You are done and you may not come back, you may not show your face here on Sunday.

So I was sitting there, just holding the weight of all of that, and way up in the front of the room, there was a door cracked open, and there was light streaming in. It was the only light in the room. And I really felt like God saying, Jen, I know you don't want to go, but I am offering you a way out. And it was really profound and yet so painful. Like we could barely breathe that day.

Mike Cospers: Phil had to drive across town to Mars Hill central offices to turn in his keys, his laptop, and do an exit interview.

105 MIN

Jen Smidt: An intern - literally, an intern, after being there for 18 years - walked in the room and said, Hey, I, I gotta just gotta have you sign this real quick before you go. In that process, he was...a non-disclosure was slid across the table to him. They had told him they would pay him severance, and Phil read it, and it was all sorts of legalese. And Phil said, Absolutely not. You guys fired me. I'm leaving with conflict with Mars Hill Church, I'm not signing this. So he got in the car. I was... And he was just a shell of a man, and he said, Jen, I don't know what I just did to our family, but I just walked away from \$25,000 because I could not sign that and I wouldn't.

Mike Cospers: A friend reached out when they heard that the Smidt's had left without severance, asking if they could start a GoFundMe for them. People want to help, they said, and they reluctantly said yes. It's another one of these moments in the story where the light does break through. The Smidt's had been pastors and counselors for years at the church, walking couples through marriage counseling and crisis counseling and premarital counseling, and investing in people in countless ways. Tracing the threads of their impact in that community would be impossible. In this moment, the church, meaning the people of God, showed up for them.

Jen Smidt: They... Dear friends set up a GoFundMe to raise that goal of \$25,000 for us,

and within half of that day, that number was hit and then doubled by the end of the next day, when we finally said, Please, like, turn this off. This is too much. We were just so overwhelmed with the people of God being so kind and gracious and generous to us. And that night, Phil got a call from Mars Hill who had heard about the GoFundMe, and for whatever their motives were said, Alright, we'll pay you severance. So literally, within 48 hours of that beginning, with all of the gifts that we got and the final severance, almost, you know, within several thousand dollars, we were given a year's salary.

Mike Cosper: More resignations followed in the weeks ahead, including worship leaders Chad Gardner, and Zach Bolen. Mike Anderson published a post titled, Hello, my name is Mike, I'm a Recovering True Believer, in which he expressed deep regrets for his participation as, "Minister of Propaganda" for Mars Hill. Things were nearing a boiling point. Paul Tripp had been a member of the Board of Advisors and Accountability since the previous November, and as these events were unfolding, he and Garrett Higbee, another pastoral counselor from Harvest Bible Chapel, were tasked with meeting with the former elders who had a grievance with the church. He was completely unprepared for what he encountered.

 @PaulTripp

Paul Tripp: It was like sitting with guys who had come from Vietnam or something like that with PTSD. I've never been in a room with that many men who couldn't speak without weeping. And we wept too. I think it was the... the emotions are coming back. I think it was one of the most emotional things I've ever experienced in my life. One of the saddest things I experienced, the description that if you'd stand back and you would... you would do a summary description of what these men had witnessed and experienced, it was clearly one of, one of the most horrifically dysfunctional leadership communities I've ever been exposed to. I didn't just weep for these men, I wept for the church, for the cause of the gospel. It was just incredibly powerful.

Garrett and I left that room stunned, sort of silent in the car, and with a desire to do something and not knowing what that would... would look like. But we now are in the possession of a picture that I don't think anybody had with the detail that the two of us had.

Mike Cosper: Tripp and Higbee wanted to see something healthier emerge at Mars Hill, and they knew it had to go beyond negotiations with people who were wounded, into deeper repentance by its leaders. That didn't just apply to Mark, it also applied to Sutton. In June, Sutton and his wife went to meet with Higbee for a retreat, to explore some of the root issues behind the toxic and abusive culture at Mars Hill.

110 MIN

Sutton Turner: It was a turning point. We got down to some deep sin issues that I needed to repent of, to my wife, to others. And then also Garrett looked at me at the - it was kinda like you would say the climax of that weekend, and said, Um, you don't have to be a good soldier, and you don't have to go down with the ship. And, um, nobody had ever told me that. And I realized, like, Oh, I don't have to die on this plane that's gonna hit this mountain. It opened my eyes to so many things that I saw that Mark was willing to sacrifice me for and use me, to do the things that he wanted to get done. And I realized in that summer of '14, that I was leaving Mars Hill. I just didn't know when.

Mike Cosper: Paul Tripp's desire for Mark was similar: A hope for a reorientation of the

heart and an invitation to a different way of doing ministry.

Paul Tripp: I said to him once, Mark, what you need is a 65-year-old, a seasoned pastor, who becomes your executive pastor, who can follow you out of a meeting and say, You must not talk to your leaders that way, we're gonna get them together again, you're gonna go in and you're gonna ask for their forgiveness. Now I still, at that point, didn't know the complete depth of the dysfunction inside of Mark. The most controlling people I ever met are the most fearful, and that fear and that macho bravado and the dominance, and then the permission to treat your supposed ministry peers abusively, that stuff doesn't flow out of the interior of a man that's healthy. It just doesn't. But by that time, Mark is so big and applauded and written about and celebrated, there's no touching him.

Mike Cospers: On July 18th, Mars Hill posted a video that would come to be known by many as the hostage video. It features Driscoll sitting in the back of the church's auditorium, looking like he hasn't shaved or slept in a few days, talking about the church's controversies. The video is a mix of Mark describing how he wants to grow, what he's learning, and why the church has responded the way it has. It's also something of an appeal for the church to hang in with them through the troubles. One passage caught a lot of attention though.

Mark Driscoll: As well, one of the things that has been complex is the fact that a lot of the people that we are dealing with in this season remain anonymous, and so we don't know how to reconcile or how to work things out with...with people, because we're not entirely sure who they are. And so that has... that has made things a little more complex and difficult as well.

Mike Cospers: Given that there were literally dozens of open letters, grievances with the signatures of many, and blogs dating back almost a decade with accounts of people burned by the church, not to mention their own internal accounting for people that had been fired, shunned and otherwise publicly shamed, this line received a backlash. Including a formation of a large Facebook group called Dear Pastor Mark & Mars Hill: We Are Not Anonymous.

To this day, that group has almost 600 members. 11 days after that video aired, there was a post in that Facebook group, that after everything else was probably the straw that broke the camel's back.

The post was from Zach Malm It reads: Dear William Wallace II / Mark Driscoll, You are not anonymous and here are pages and pages of your insane rants from 2000, which you've gone to great lengths to destroy and keep hidden.

The post had a link to screenshots from Mars Hill's message board, dating back to the year 2000, when Driscoll posted under the alias William Wallace II.


We talked about this on a previous episode, and we've chosen not to read them here on the podcast, but they're very easy to find if you want to; at Matthew Paul Turner's blog, for instance, where he links them in their entirety. They're foul, misogynistic, homophobic,

bic and hate-filled, mixing fire and brimstone fundamentalism with Sam Kinison quotes. And that's just the first page or two; there are 140 pages in the collection.

For several years, Mars Hill staff had reached out to longtime members to see if anyone had kept an archive of these posts, fearful of what would happen if they resurfaced. As the conflict grew in 2014, former members were banding together to try and get stories out there about Driscoll's abuses. One group of them adopted jokingly the nickname, YFWTWN, You F'ed With The Wrong Nerds. And three of them collaborated to distribute these posts. Dwayne Forehand found them buried in the internet archive, Adam Weigel assembled it as a PDF, and Zach posted them - first in a private group, and then in the We Are Not Anonymous Group.

Matthew Paul Turner picked it up from there, and it spread like wildfire, to Rachel Held Evans' blog, Warren Throckmorton's, and many others. Backlash to this news was explosive, online and in the church. The very next day, Paul Tripp announced his resignation from the Board of Advisors. Shortly after that, James MacDonald resigned as well, though he made clear he had no conflict with Mars Hill and was fully in support of Driscoll. Then about a week after that, on August the 8th, Acts 29 released a letter stating that they were kicking Driscoll and Mars Hill out of their network. For some pastors who'd been hanging on at the church, removal from Acts 29 was kind of a wake up call.

Ryan Kearns for instance, was a pastor at Mars Hill Bellevue.

 @Ryan_learns

Ryan Kearns: So Matt Chandler had gone through the trouble of finding the personal email address of every elder at Mars Hill so he could make sure that we were getting the communication directly from him. And it definitely signaled to a lot of us at the time, like, Matt is calling a lot of you to take these things more seriously, to act a little bit more courageously, and to really consider the things that are being put forward. I think that was a tipping point for a lot of us, internally.

Mike Cospers: About 10 days later was the church's annual pastors and wives retreat in Suncadia, a beautiful resort in Washington state. It's the kind of thing the Mars Hill pastors typically looked forward to all year long, but as you can imagine, coming after the battering the church had endured for the prior 10 months, and the contentiousness and paranoia that pervaded the church, no one was looking forward to this one, including Dave Bruskas.

Dave Bruskas: When I interact with the guys I worked with at Mars Hill, we still refer to that as the retreat from hell, and in my way of looking at the history of Mars Hill, it was the end of the end. If the beginning of the end of Mars Hill started in 2005, 2006, when polity moved away from a plurality of elders, to me, that retreat - I believe it was in August of '14 - was the end of the end. Because at the end of that retreat, neither Mark nor Sutton nor I had any credibility at all with all 67 elders.

Mike Cospers: Here's Ryan Kearns again.

Ryan Kearns: I remember this moment, it's one of my most clear moments of when I knew Mars Hill was done. Mark walked into this conference room where all of us are

sitting, we're all waiting there, sitting with our wives, waiting to hear from Mark for the first time in six weeks, going, like, Man where are we going, what's going to happen. And I think even still at that moment, there were a lot of us going, Okay, we can still turn this ship around, it doesn't have to go this way, maybe we can find a moment here where we could be transparent and accountable and repent and all that. And I remember Mark sitting down, and he just starts riffing a little bit and talking about what the last six weeks of his life had looked like. And this was the moment I knew Mars Hill probably wasn't going to make it, is he just starts rambling a little bit, and he says, Hey, recently I was just sitting on the porch with Grace and she said, Let's play a word association game. And she says to him, I want you to tell me what you fill in the blank after this: People are... And he said, the first word that came to his mind was, dangerous. And I knew in that moment that that was such a true thing that he was saying, that when Mark thought of people, there was a level of paranoia and danger that he felt. And I just, in that moment, just was reflecting and I think the conversation went from there. How do you shepherd people when your default position of them is that they're dangerous?

Mike Cosper: Mark also gave a talk to the entire gathering, and that stuck out to Aaron Gray.

Aaron Gray: The second day, Mark Driscoll gets up and, like, you could have heard a pin drop in the room. It was... I mean, the tension in the air was palpable to every single person. And I remember Mark gets up and kind of gives a general leadership lesson on caring for yourself with this big, long section about all of the science of adrenal gland fatigue, because that's something he had gone through at some point. And I remember just the general... And he got down from teaching and, like, the whole room was just kind of like, Seriously, like our church is melting down and you give us a lecture on adrenal gland fatigue. Like, what are we doing here? Like, why are we not talking about what's going on with our church and what's going on with, you know, the culture, and what's going on with the things being said in the media. It was just a... It was kind of like everyone just... Their jaws kind of left open, like, Well, that was really odd that we're not talking about it.

And I think for a lot of people that was like, Well, this is probably done, this is too far gone, Mars Hill can't recover from this.

120 MIN

Mike Cosper: That entire day turned out to be eventful. This was where a now infamous phone call was made to Paul Tripp, where a group of pastors gathered in a conference room and listened to his unvarnished reflections about his experience at Mars Hill.

Paul Tripp: This is without a doubt, the most abusive, coercive ministry culture I've ever been involved with.

I was promised confidentiality, So I was willing to have that conversation. That initial conversation was done over the phone and I was recorded. And within 90 minutes, literally, there were quotes posted of mine out of context, in the Washington Post, on their feed. And then this thing just blew. And the story was that I just wanted to bring Mars Hill down, and so I went public. And that's not what happened at all. The response was pretty aggressive from Mars Hill, and because the quotes that, you know, these services

pull out are always the most inflammatory and it made me look like a bit of a monster, it was a very tough experience, and I would have never done any of this in a public forum. And it got to the point where my pastor, who is Eric Mason, was contacted to put me on church discipline for my sin against the leaders of Mars Hill.

Mike Cospers: Tripp's intention was to offer courage to men trying to navigate a crisis, and at least some of those in that room needed strong words and a wake-up call to see how bad things really were. Leaking his comments to the press went off the rails, and it created a variety of unforeseen consequences. But he also got through to some of them.

Mars Hill Pastor 1: How would you advise us to go forward? I mean, we're just... Any bit of wisdom you can provide, even just your perspective, we'd be grateful for.

Paul Tripp: Do you remember the event where Mark gave all the guys a couple stones?

Mars Hill Pastor 2: Yes, I was there.

Paul Tripp: Find those.

Ryan Kearns: That's what Paul Tripp said to us, You guys need to find your stones and you need to lead. And I think in that moment, Dustin particularly felt compelled that night, where he was gonna get up, we were gonna have an all elder dinner, and Ken-srue was gonna get up and confront Mark in front of all the elders. Then a big fiasco happened with some of the Bellevue elders, Adam Ramsey, who was in charge of student ministry at Mars Hill, he had gotten caught - it sounds weird to say - but it had been discovered that he had emailed Matt Chandler, thanking him for what he did and being willing to speak out and nothing more. Just that, Hey, Matt, I know that must have took guts, I appreciate what you did, and I just want you to know that we hear you. That's all the email said. This was discovered, you know, there was always a level of like we were using IT and some of those things, probably to check in and just see what was going on in everyone's emails. That was discovered, so all the Bellevue elders were pulled into a meeting. And the lead pastor at Bellevue was Thomas Hurst, and he, you know, just slams the email down on the table in front of Adam Ramsey. I think he thought he had a big smoking gun moment where we were all gonna rally around him and the executive elders and go, Here's our sacrificial lamb. But the rest of us just didn't see it that way. There were about nine other Bellevue elders, and we all looked at that and said, Man, we don't think that's a smoking gun. And it just led to yelling and storming out, screaming, and Bruskas coming in, and all of that and everything in between.

Needless to say, it derailed the rest of the programming for the night, so Dustin didn't get the chance to have that big public confrontation moment that he wanted with Mark.

Mike Cospers: Fear and anxiety ran the other way too, with the executive elders and with Mark. Right after the call with Tripp, Dave Bruskas bumped into an elder who'd been on that call and was overcome with emotion. He ended up getting pulled into a tense conversation with him.

1 2 5 M I N

Dave Bruskas: The whole point of that meeting was me just trying to encourage the guys, If you can just wait until this weekend, we are going to make a public announcement of the things that are concerning you, and then we can have further conversation at that point. It took a while to get there. So I come out of that meeting into one of the hotel hallways, and there is my wife with Mark and Grace Driscoll, and they just look terrified. You know, each one of them have a complexion as white as a ghost. And I'm kind of taken aback by that, and they genuinely were concerned for my physical wellbeing. They said, are you okay, has anybody hurt you, what's going on? And I realized at that point, maybe in ways that I had been naive to before, that the level of fear and uncertainty and insecurity had taken on a realm that was just beyond recovery. It was just... It was over.

I believe after Mark and Sutton and I found out that the group of elders had had a conversation with Paul Tripp and were thinking about next steps in regards to that conversation, Mark determined that he and Sutton should leave the retreat. So they left, and we had one more meeting, which all of our 14 remaining lead pastors got up and each one of them shared a scripture, shared a prayer, and it was the most bizarre, strange, confusing, terrifying, absurdly comical things I've ever been a part of.

Mike Cospser: Everyone left feeling a sense of doom. Here's Tim Smith.

Tim Smith: He was just trying to be dad, like in the middle of all this, and hold the family together and he did his best, but it was brutal. And I remember getting my bags and walking out, getting in my car with my wife, Beth, and driving out of the parking lot. And I just remember saying to her, Beth, we just attended the funeral of Mars Hill.

Mike Cospser: Though his plan to confront Driscoll at the retreat had derailed, Dustin Kensrue was still determined to take a stand. And after they got home, he connected with Ryan Kearns and Drew Hensley, another pastor, about doing something together.

Here's Drew Hensley.

Drew Hensley: Yeah, the letter sort of started with Dustin Kensrue. He started writing this letter, and I remember the day really clearly. He reached out to Ryan and myself, and we drove out to Dustin's house and we looked over what he had put together, and throughout that entire day we tweaked it, we added to it, the three of us, and got it to a place where it didn't come across as vindictive. It honestly came across as a letter of care. That was our heartbeat. A letter of care for Mark, for his family and for the church, and feeling like, Hey, this is our role as pastors. And then once the letter was completed, we spent - all three of us - we spent hours on the phone reaching out to other pastors, just saying, Hey, we're gonna send this to you, there's not pressure in this, but if you want to sign onto this, this is something we're gonna share with the executive team.

Mike Cospser: About the same time that letter was being written and circulated, another letter with formal charges had already been submitted to the board, this one with 21 signatories, all of whom were former staffers from Mars Hill. The letter from Kensrue, Kearns and Hensley, along with six others, was submitted on August 22nd. Because of the fact that they signed it fully aware of what the consequences would be to their jobs,

 @drewchensley

the nine that signed it became known as the Noble Nine.

Within a couple of weeks, eight of them would have resigned or been fired. The ninth, a non-staff elder overseeing community groups, would step down the first week of October.

Drew Hensley: There were about five or six of us that signed that letter - I can't remember exactly who worked over at Bellevue. And Mark was supposed to preach that Sunday. But they couldn't fire us, I think they didn't want to fire us immediately that night, because it would almost prove the point that Mars Hill was heavy handed, so they were trying to do everything they could to tiptoe around being perceived as heavy handed. So I'll tell you, Mike, honestly, it was one of the most awkward Sundays of my life. All six of us, five or six of us still showed up at a church that Sunday and it felt super segregated. It was like the six of us over on one side of the lobby, engaging and talking to people, and they were stunned to see us there. And then the other Bellevue elders who had not signed the letter and didn't agree with us, over on the other side of the lobby, talking to people. So it felt much more almost like a, I don't know, a caucus in Iowa where voters are going around and talking to different political candidates to hear. I mean, I was still stunned they even allowed us to come, but as I said, I think they were fearful of being accused of being heavy handed.

I remember that Sunday night, all the Bellevue elders got called into a big conference room meeting with Dave Bruskas and, man, it was exactly what you'd think it would be. It was super contentious between Dave and primarily Dustin Kensrue, if memory serves me correctly.

Mike Cospser: That particular Sunday in August was also the day that Driscoll announced his leave of absence. You heard clips from that announcement on our first episode.

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

130 MIN

Mike Cospser: There's a scene from that day that's stuck with Dave Bruskas ever since.

Dave Bruskas: There was this green room we had, the back room we had, in Bellevue where he was preaching, and I just happened to peek in the window. He was back there with his family, and I saw him sitting in a chair, kind of head in his hands. And I saw his family gather around him, and it particularly looked like his mom and dad - who were really a really important part of his bigger story - kind of comforting him. And it crossed my mind pretty profoundly, like he's done, like he's not coming back here, this whole thing is over. And if this whole thing is over for him being in the pulpit, there is going to have to be a lot of work done quickly for these churches to have any hope of survival.

Mike Cospser: There were a lot of moving pieces at this time. MacDonald and Tripp's resignations from the board meant that they needed two more appointees. Jon Phelps was one, a longtime member and respected entrepreneur in the church. Matt Rogers, a volunteer pastor at Bellevue and a business leader in the community, was the other.

Michael Van Skaik was also a lay leader and he stayed on as the board chair. Larry Osborne, who's the pastor of North Coast Church, a megachurch and pioneer in multi-site ministry, also remained on the board, as well as Bruskas, Driscoll, and Sutton Turner.

Because of the bylaws change that took place in 2013, the Board of Advisors and Accountability didn't have direct responsibility to investigate the charges against Driscoll. Instead, their job was to appoint what would be called a Board of Elders, mostly made up of lead pastors who would take the time to review the charges against Mark and interview dozens of people. They would then present their findings back to the Board of Advisors and Accountability who would make a determination about what actions to take. Matt Rogers would serve on that committee as well, as its chair, along with seven other pastors from the church, most of them lead pastors, including Aaron Gray and Tim Smith.

But another surprise emerged in mid-September when the board announced that Sutton Turner had resigned and was transitioning almost immediately. In reality, that decision had been in the works for almost a month, since Suncadia.

Sutton Turner: So during that elder process, go through all the history of my life, that's documented now in an elder file at Ballard, so every secret, every family secret, every sin, every whatever, marital problem, whatever thing that was consuming that, you know, four or five hour meeting with those elders that day. And so I got a text, a repeated text, after Suncadia that if I didn't resign, all of that information would soon be on the internet. I was just like, I'm just... I'm not gonna do that. Not gonna do that to my mom, not gonna do that to my dad, I'm not gonna do that to... I mean, there was stuff in there that's just... it's not fit to be on an internet for the rest of your life, just because they want to take down Mark Driscoll, they're gonna take me down. Because that was the general belief, that somehow I was the person that was allowing Mark and going to allow Mark to continue on, you know, which you know, but those narratives happen.

Mike Cospes: Within a few days, he pulled Mark aside and told him that he needed to resign.

Sutton Turner: Dave and I went with Mark and that's where I told them what the situation was. Obviously I'd told Dave beforehand what I was gonna do. And that's the first time that Mark was like, No, you're not, you're not resigning. And thank goodness that Dave is the man of character that he is because he stood up for me and he said, Yes, Sutton's going to resign, and we're going to accept his resignation. He's earned that. And I think that if Dave wouldn't have stood up for me, I would've said, Yeah, you're right, you're right, I'm gonna stay. And I would have done that to my family and sacrificed my family just for that whole thing of being overly consumed with approval of authority.

Mike Cospes: Though he resigned from the staff, Sutton stayed connected to Mark through the coming weeks. The investigation began on August 25th and was focused specifically on the formal charges submitted by 21 elders. They alleged that Mark did not meet six biblical qualifications for eldership: Self-control and discipline, not domineering, not violent but gentle, respectable, not arrogant, and not quick tempered. For

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supporting evidence, they cited 25 specific incidences, most of which happened after 2012. Some who signed that letter, or who might otherwise have been interviewed, ultimately refused to participate in the process. Many of them didn't think that long-time elders like Tim Smith or Bubba Jennings or AJ Hamilton could be objective or break ranks with Mark. But the Board of Elders still managed to interview 40 people. In reporting this story, I've had the opportunity to review details of those meetings, and some of the hesitation was probably valid. Initial reactions from a few on the board were defensive of Mark and skeptical of those raising charges. But within just a few weeks of the investigation, that skepticism faded.

Aaron Gray: That was a real eye-opening season for me, where I had to go in and do interview after interview, after interview with all of these people who had been hurt and who had been witnesses of just the unhealthy culture and all that sort of stuff. So that was a real turning point for me, where I realized, Oh, this isn't just some people out there on the internet who are angry, these are real people who have, you know, kind of poured their life into this church and are feeling left behind, feeling hurt, feeling steamrolled.

And so I started to have a shift where, you know, later on in the summer, like, Oh, things are really unhealthy and things do need to change. And even in some meetings and conversations with Mark himself, like, Ah, that's not a good way to be dealing with this. So yeah, there was a time kind of later in the fall where, you know, Mars Hill was laying people off, campuses were getting shut down, so many people had left, and I really did start, you know, thinking, like, Do I need to leave, do I need to get out of here?

Tim Smith: You know, in our first conversation you asked me what drew me to the church. And man, that conversation for me was huge, a couple months ago now, I guess, or six weeks ago, just to even remember what first drew me to Mars Hill, and the sense of the movement, the sense of God's presence, the sense of what God was doing there. It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced and it changed my life. And I almost couldn't get through that conversation with you, Mike, just I got really emotional, even just thinking about how profound it was. And now in 2014, almost 15 and a half years later, as I'm sitting in this process and I'm just watching the whole thing come undone. It was devastating.

Mike Cosper: Those weeks turned into a deep burden too, as the board was spending countless hours, inviting people to relive some of the most difficult moments of their lives with them.

Tim Smith: I started going on walks while I would be on all these phone calls. I had day after day, I would walk 10 miles or more on the phone. So just hours and hours of devastating phone calls, trying to manage Mars Hill as it's coming apart. Beth, my wife, knew how devastating it was for me. I lost a ton of weight. I'm a tall guy, I'm like 6'4", and I got down to, like, the 170s at that point. I was just super depressed in every sense of the word, and not just emotionally, but just physically. I had that thousand yard stare, my mind was just a fog all the time. I was pretty absent for my kids in that time. Yeah, it was terrible.

Mike Cosper: As part of the investigation process, they interviewed Driscoll.

140 MIN

 @MattRogers_

Tim Smith: We wanted to let him speak to these things specifically as well. And that interview with Mark was a key turning point in the process for me. It went on for hours and it was brutal. And to be fair, Driscoll did acknowledge sin at multiple points in this conversation, particularly in the past. He was definitely aware of times when he had failed, but his overall posture and attitude in that specific conversation was one of defensiveness and justification much more. And what I saw from him at that point was him pushing back against almost all authority. From his perspective in that conversation, it was like, Look guys, the real issue here is that elders have had way too much authority for way too long, and if that wasn't the case, we wouldn't be sitting here. And he exhibited the very behavior and heart that he was being accused of to the very group that was tasked with investigating him. And that day and what followed in the days and in the next couple weeks after that, they were really the lowest point for me. Because I realized what I had been denying for a long time, that there is no real accountability for Mark.

Mike Cospers: When the interviews were completed, the Board of Elders submitted a report to the Board of Advisors on October the 8th, confirming three of the allegations. They found Mark to be quick tempered, arrogant and domineering. They also found that there had been a longstanding pattern of these behaviors, and that Mark had been confronted about them many times privately by friends, fellow pastors, and advisors from outside the church. In accordance with the scriptures then, their recommendations were that Mark needed public rebuke, removal from eldership and church leadership, and to enter a process of repentance and reconciliation, seeking the care of pastors and counselors during the process.

The next day, on October the 9th, the board of elders met with the Board of Advisors to discuss the report. This audio is from that call.

Recording Audio: This call is being recorded.

Matt Rogers: Uh, the, the other board member board elder members, really wanted to make clear that we are fully unanimous behind what we found, but also deeply committed to standing by Pastor Mark. That he goes through a process that we think can provide a lot of healing and a lot of help for Pastor Mark. And if he goes through that and uses...

Mike Cospers: The main purpose of the call was to try and build consensus around the findings of the Board of Elders, as well as what would be presented the next day in a meeting with the Driscoll's. There are two things this tape reveals. First, in some of the exchanges, you hear the tension of different priorities between the Board of Elders, whose first job is to hold Driscoll accountable to the qualifications of a pastor, and the Board of Overseers, which exercises authority and accountability, but is also responsible for the financial wellbeing of the church.

Matt Rogers, who served on both committees, is speaking here on behalf of the Board of Elders.

Matt Rogers: Uh, the other guys on the call, candidly, have a lot of, uh, questions or anxiety about how the decision's gonna get made about going next. I think in the back

of their mind, there's a... a fear that, uh, we would try to rush this and get Pastor Mark back in two weeks, and, uh, I think it would be helpful for them to get some feedback on how, uh, Michael and Jon, you specifically are processing what's going on and how you'll... you'll think about this going forward.

Mike Cospers: And you can hear that different angle from Michael Van Skaik, chairman of the Board of Overseers.

Michael Van Skaik: There's a... There's a fine line that we've got to navigate. Um, obviously we want the church to survive, um, and I'll... I'll just say that the current... You know, the key points right now are just financially, um, and so there's a... Speaking for myself - we haven't spoken as a Board of Overseers yet regarding this - but, um, you know, the next couple months is gonna be really tight, uh, financially, um, and so we...we wanna... We wanna work with Mark, um, and we wanna...we wanna, uh, hope and pray that when he is, uh, ready, that, um, there's a church to come back to.

Mike Cospers: There's also in this call, an evident gap in the awareness between what the Board of Elders knew about Driscoll and experienced, having done the investigation and worked with him, and what the Board of Overseers could even imagine.

Michael Van Skaik: ... situations. If he gave us all the middle finger and says, Hey, you guys don't know what you're talking about, these 25 witnesses are all, all wrong, um, well that... that's... That's a problem. Um, he's a smart guy, he's not gonna do that. Uh, but what... What we're looking for is, is...is some ownership and repentance in a manner that we probably have not seen from him maybe ever.

Mike Cospers: That last line is really important, I think, for the lay of the land inside Mars Hill. It affirms so many other things we've heard. Most importantly, it shows an awareness at the very top of the organization that the repentance necessary to walk through a reconciliation process might be out of reach for Driscoll. Equally significant is the assumption that Driscoll wouldn't respond by saying these 25 are wrong and I'm right. In his three-hour interview with the Board of Elders, he'd more or less already done that. A little later, Tim Smith raises concerns based on First Timothy 5, of not showing partiality to Driscoll versus other elders who face discipline.

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Tim Smith: We've only done a full-on trial type process like this on a few occasions over the years, and as we've been thinking about that, I think about the trial, uh, of Bent and Paul Petry, uh, that resulted in, in, um, Paul Petry's, uh, removal of eldership by vote of the full Council of Elders. And then there was another process that we went through regarding James Noriega that was overseen by then the, um, the Board of Directors. Um, and I have a sense - and, you know, other guys can speak for themselves - but, um, I have a strong conviction being there for both of those - well, being there for all of these - having voted to remove, um, each of those men from eldership, um, I just believe that, uh, there's a lot less, um, that we remove them for than has been presented and uncovered here about Mark. Um, and, uh, and so I think if, if we allow him to retain the office of elder in the midst of all this, um, and if we do anything but remove him, um, indefinitely and have a... more of a value based outcome than a time based process, um, I, I... I personally feel like that's... that's very dangerously close to, uh, partiality if not full-on

partiality, because we... we really are applying a different standard.

Mike Cospers: He goes on to clarify further that this doesn't mean he wants Mark fired, but it does mean he wants him to submit to the process that any other elder would be if they were in his shoes: To step down from leadership, to have no voice in leaving the church, and submit to a process of repentance and reconciliation.

AJ Hamilton was another one of the pastors on the Board of Elders.



AJ Hamilton: And I would say too to, uh, Michael, Larry, and Jon, you guys are... You guys are handpicked men by Mark, men that he respects, men that we respect, and the authority to speak this type of message to him, uh, one like I just said, he's put it in a place where he would not receive that from us, but he would receive that from you. He did not receive it from the many men that have left and talked to him about these things in the past, um, but... But you're his handpicked men to help him, uh, lead this church, and so I would just ask you that, uh, to know there's probably nobody else in the world that he will hear something like this from. And so if it lines up with your convictions and you can rest on the confidence that we have as a Board of Elders, you guys are in a key place to do something that others can't.

Mike Cospers: That next day, Friday the 10th, and then on Saturday, the 11th, the Board of Overseers met with the Driscoll's. No official records were kept of that meeting, but on the following Monday, the general beats of it were shared with the Board of Elders.

They were told that on Friday night, when they communicated their intent to extend his time out of the pulpit, there was an eruption and the conversation went south for about 20 minutes. They were able to resume the conversations though, and worked through the rest of the investigation's findings, and talk about the future. Still, the overall experience confirmed for the Board of Overseers that he needed to remain out of leadership for the time. There was still a point of contention, though, between the two boards over whether or not a restoration plan should have an end date. The Board of Elders was emphatic that it should not, but the overseers were trying to thread a needle, keeping Driscoll engaged in the process, and having a carrot for church members, to keep them around until he came back.

According to Sutton Turner, who was still in contact with Mark at this time, Driscoll was seeking counsel from Larry Osborne, who was actually still on the Board of Overseers, and Mark DeMoss, a public relations specialist.

Then on Wednesday, the 15th, a resignation letter from Driscoll, addressed to Michael Van Skaik, appeared online at Religion News Service. The Board of Overseers and the Board of Elders were unaware that he had made the decision to resign. In that letter, he thanks the board for assuring him that he had not disqualified himself from ministry.

And that of course brings us back to where we began.

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

Mark Driscoll: I was in the bedroom, Grace was in the living room.

Tim Smith: He started this church, that God called him here, that he was never gonna leave it, that he'd preach his own funeral, get into the casket, and close his own coffin on himself.

Grace Driscoll: We're released.

Mark Driscoll: Yeah.

Grace Driscoll: From Mars Hill.

Mark Driscoll: Yeah.

Tim Smith: We weren't going to fire him, and by him resigning, further processes, they were canceled, they were circumvented, they were derailed by his resignation.

Mark Driscoll: The Lord revealed to me that, you know, a trap has been set, there's... There's no way for us to return to leadership.

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

Dave Bruskas: And, and I just want to, I just want to be on record of saying, I think that's absolutely false. Every single one of those men wanted to see, without exception, Mark restored to ministry.

Tim Smith: And it was a two- or three-hour meeting, is all it too, to come to the grim reality that Mars Hill was done.

Mark Driscoll: If your goal is church growth and not church health, one way to do it is get a really charismatic, dynamic personality that attracts a large number of people, and let him do whatever he wants. And then he'll never leave. And the people will say, I go to so-and-so's church, so and so is my pastor, have you ever met him? No, no, I never met him. You never met him. He's my pastor.

The big issue that churches struggle with in a senior pastor concept is, How do you do succession after the senior pastor? Because when he goes, what happens to all the people? Sweet Jesus, they all left. You know, it's weird. It's like you have a family, Dad got in a car wreck, and all the kids decided to go change their last name. Really? Well, Dad's gone, the family's over.

Mike Cosper: In the case of Mars Hill, though, the wound is a little deeper, because Mark didn't get hit by a bus. He got confronted by his own shadow, and instead of taking responsibility and dealing with it, like he'd called men to do for almost 20 years, he packed his bags and he left.

Jeff Bettger: It was literally world shattering for everybody involved because he made those decisions and used God as an excuse to, uh, neglect his responsibility that he had. So basically he was... Essentially in the end, Mark was everything that he used to preach about when... Against, when he was doing his masculine thing. He up and left the community, he left these people in dust, he hurt them, he damaged them. Mark became the deadbeat dad.

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